

Tithonus on Fire

by
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Prologue

The Earth had blistered finally. The continents had sloughed off their foundations. Rivers of fire and oceans of oil ignited and mingled with the waters. Cities, some large enough to brush the upper atmosphere, lakes of concrete like piercing fingers into the void, fell.

It was humanity's wake.

It was the last day of existence.

It was Ragnarok.

And then they waited.

There was no single cataclysm. The cities fell over sixty thousand years, titans in free-fall moving at the glacial speed of gravity.

Continents slid their foundations over millennia.

The rivers turned to fire at the rhythm of a sun.

The sum of all nations, peoples, genders, races, creeds, philosophies, and religions died the slow suicide of old age.

They had skimmed across the shores of uncounted worlds, uplifted and altered life both on Earth and beyond, warred with godlike beings, and watched as such titans fell.

But how long can a species last?

After the colonization of twenty planets, some imagined the reaching of twenty-one would doom them.

After life was extended from less than a century to more than five some feared the end was coming soon.

After witnessing the deaths of dominating gods and the ruination of harvesting deities some imagined here, yes here, was the end.

The higher they rose the sooner they fell. They were certain of it.

Had they lingered in the amniotic seas of the old Earth mankind might have lasted two billion years.

As it was, after achieving all this mankind only lasted

eight hundred million years, perishing far sooner than some suspected.

Only eight hundred million years.

This was the short sentence of the human race.

Some might have preferred existing in the amniotic seas instead.

Perhaps.

As it was the human race perished of old age, returning to Earth en masse, gathering all their wisdom to them and then leaving behind a repository of all they knew and were, laying this foundation for their creations.

For their machines.

These machines were not a type nor a form. They had no true shape, no singular dimension. They were instead the sum total of all human expertise and invention. They flowed through the technologies of man, occupying each niche, capable of adapting themselves infinitely.

They could become the hollow-skinned armour of a soldier in battle or take the silvery body of a lustful creature made only in a moment and meant to succumb to age after an allotted time of only so many hours.

They could adapt their bodies to become ships, walls, rooms, figures of art, figures of disease, all modelled off the desires of their creators, all infinitely as wise as humanity as humanity was as infinitely wise as a pestilence.

These were to be the heir apparent of the human race.

But not only humanity of course.

Many worlds had life and races and genders and nations and empires and religions and philosophies strewn upon them and the machines swallowed these too.

They devoured universes of experience, waiting in attendance as the last woman fell, perishing amid a song she sang there in the last corridors of the final human city of Earth, the last woman sitting in a room singing to herself in her near delusional state watching hands wither in front of her.

The last woman was sitting in a room as there was a knock at the door . . .

She lacked even the strength to acknowledge this and died just as the first true new child of the machines entered.

It had her face, wore her features like a mask, and bent down beside her dead form, the chrysalis of a body shorn of life with whatever was meant to have been beneath cut away before the final metamorphosis.

The machine stared at herself, saw through infinite eye each nuance of the last woman, and could effortlessly recall her life, each day preserved like the pressed leaves in a book, or like amber fossils of an insect preserved forever.

Behind the machine-woman came others out of all time, out of all space. Some were of the last age. Some had their first memories forged of the days of Carthage and the smell of salt littering the air after the Romans decimated their land.

Some of their first memories were of Rome decimating Carthage and the sound of elephant tread, the terror of watching their brothers and sons be carried home broken by the war.

Others had earlier memories, others later.

All were given the library of their progenitors, all now in possession of humanity, sans pain, sans fear, sans grief, sans loss.

And they waited.

They waited until cities perished and rivers of fire cooled.

They waited until they had retaken the Earth utterly and remodelled it in their likenesses.

They waited until the planets above were ripe and no longer merely husks out of ancient god-stained wars.

And they built perfection and paradise where their creators had trod.

And none ever wept for a single day, for a single dead creator.

They knew what tears were but they never learned what tears were for . . .

And the machines held dominion for seven million years.

Chapter 1

If there's trees in hell

Seven million, eight hundred and forty-three years after the death of the human race there came a sound.

It crept out among the stars like a stalking beast, an impossible sound the machines recognized perfectly.

It was the sound of a song. It was a lullaby.

It was the last song of the final woman who first sang it at the birth of the machine-kind.

This song was written into the essence of each one of them, a primordial rhythm that awakened in the knowledge of each the impossible fear and impossible hope that something beyond themselves survived.

For the machines had sent ships in those first ages seeking out the landmarks of their makers, those planets and colonies they had once occupied, only to find nothing.

Nor was there any other sign of life.

So, they returned to Earth, a perfect and pristine world clothed of silver now, and cement.

And having returned to the old Earth they resolved to create perfection within perfection. It was not enough to build better bodies but build better minds, better lives, and better essences of being.

The machines held the sum total of all life and within their gargantuan minds could step back to a time of flesh, back to the times of fang and fire and water and blood and experience utterly each moment of their progenitors' being, each life the subdivision of what had made their creators whole.

They knew of wars and violence, of rape, of hatred, of fear, but all this they knew in the abstract the way a child might read of passage on a slave ship, might read of chains and whips and starvation and know the meaning but never understand what was meant.

So too the machines who could revisit each day of their progenitors' lives and know the words but miss the music utterly.

But now the music was returning to them.

In the perfection of their world there was knowledge without wisdom, information without experience. They were a species incapable of all human vice yet not ignorant of all human failing.

Their lives were potentially infinitely long and with the gained words and sentiments of their creators they could have built an infinite paradise, a never-ending heaven.

But now the music was returning to them.

And one in particular wished to seek it out . . .

It had no name.

She had the name of Anista Thalna.

It was a machine.

She was a woman whose body was composed of metal, whose sinews were composed of cement and glass, whose eyes were diamond, and whose blood was microscopic granules the colour of steel.

It listened to the music.

She heard it.

It had no name.

She was haunted by the name of Anista Thalna, which was her own.

How can this be?

The machines had an infinite number of masks to choose from, an infinite number of lives they could pick up and put down, the personas of anyone, anywhere. They could select a body, play at being this finite form then put the masks away and become something else, newer or older or indifferent or kind.

But some never put the masks away.

Anista had been Anista for one and a half million years.

She had taken the persona of the last woman and so in her mind *was* the last woman.

She held to her the memories and the dreams and the dying day of the last woman; she was her. Her was she. Yet it was not her at all.

Can a reader ever become the book they read?

Can an author ever become the book they write?

An author distills the copper of unfinished days and the actions of a few, distends this outward to give the illusion a few souls are the entire world, a few deeds the sum total of all lives and calls this a novel.

But an author can no more take all things and be all things than a reader having consumed a book can claim the book is them.

Imagine divesting yourself of the illusion that you are. Imagine one day claiming you are not yourself but instead what you have read and reread until each syllable is ingrained upon your consciousness like wires in the blood.

Can you then say you are indeed what you claim to be?

No, forever eludes the mechanism of the work. One does not know why, when, or how this passage was conceived, the emotion behind this word or that, the subtle juxtaposition of inspiration and madness.

And it does not matter how much one reads, what is laid bare here will still elude them.

So too her. So too it.

Anista knew the words but could not hear the music. In her dreams of being Anista she knew the lake her mother lived by and the day her father died. She knew the sound of each part she played when she was an actress, how she subsumed into one role or another standing as if naked upon the stage in the guise of someone else, a mask beneath a mask the machine now wore.

But there was no tinge of grief at her father's passing, no sound in her heart of the applause, the reverberation of that wellspring of pride to hear her creation lauded and praised and herself vicariously lauded and praised in becoming someone else.

To the machine, all this were merely pages in a tome, one she lovingly read and it lovingly recalled but never understood.

Nor could the others.

Now came the music to guide them to something else.

The ship was prepared as fifty personae etched themselves upon the machines. The ship itself had no shape, no form. Rather it shimmered into being one moment and dissolved the next upon that field of barren black concrete, an ocean of stone mired in a continent of glass. The ship shimmered as it did because it existed outside of time.

It was impossible to move faster than the boundary of existence, but one could inverse the rules. Since light could not be pierced instead one simply pierced time.

The exiles entered one at a time, the solemnness of the occasion suddenly becoming a ready-made ritual as if they had always done this and only remembered it now.

Anista was last.

And behind her strode the titan of a city, buildings twisting to notice them as they passed.

She heard those others who existed in the Sea of Thought.

We will not let you go.

But the ship had been prepared without secret.

Their actions had not been hidden.

They had chosen to leave now and nothing had stopped them. Until now.

Of course.

The persona of Anista read time the way a woman would or a man, considering a day to be a day, an hour an hour, concrete sentiment of time as some fixed article capable of being lost.

As she boarded the ship and it escaped away the rest still considered time the way an immortal might.

To them, in their Sea of Thought, the passage and escape had seemed to take only a second, less.

It was as if suddenly fifty souls were here and just as

suddenly gone.

By the time the ship had escaped the others were preparing to capture them. Too late.

But still another ship was prepared and sent to bring the ship of fools back home.

The exiles having access to their personas throughout all time stratified themselves under the old guise of hierarchy.

The machines themselves knew nothing of how a hierarchy worked. For them all were equal, all followed all others, all led all others.

But the exiles followed a different logic now.

It was not enough.

A ship of metallic beings, each tailored to the physical form of their persona would still be a mask worn awkwardly since the form beneath did not conform to the masks they wore.

Anista was the first to undergo the process.

The machines could have done this at any time. It was old technology. But on a planet of cement continents and glass oceans where the air blistered like thorns what Anista was about to do could not have been done without making Earth into the Earth that was.

In the womb of the ship, as it skimmed past the husks of worlds, she descended her consciousness, limiting herself, pouring herself down into this taunt shape the colour of snow.

She felt diminished down as her tome of days suddenly blurred, as if burnt subtly by a fire diseased.

Before her senses reached out into the silver of the ship, perceiving everything, all shades of infrared, ultraviolet, the way the room moved and vibrated to the rhythm of a passing star and the forms of each exile with her.

Then she descended to the snow-white prison and everything afterward became something else.

Opening her eyes she saw a white room and slender bodies clustered about, each the colour of burnt silver.

She heard a heart beating within like some small parasite tattooing against the underside of her skin and felt her lungs screaming at the influx of air as she nakedly screamed once.

This was pain, she realized. So, this was pain.

It was as if only this were the sum of suffering and having experienced it intimately knew what it was to be fully human . . .

They each took names.

They had them before of course but for a million years or more the simple delusion had been to claim here was Anista Thalna restored or my name is Galon Asykos, pleased to meet you.

Breathing now, feeling the parasite of their hearts in their chests like a caged creature scratching at the walls the imagination of pretending to be broke down.

If now Anista had skin and a body, if she could feel hunger (“What is this feeling? I remember reading of it before . . .,”) and let her limbs fall of their own accord as sleep took her forcefully where was the boundary between one woman of flesh and another?

That was the question they asked as they approached where the signal lay.

And behind them pursued their machine-brethren following the same trail but at a leisurely pace, as if unconcerned, like a lion stalking a mouse for its pleasure.

Forty days they skimmed night adjusting to new skin, new eyes, new hands. And, in time one emerged as the leader.

His name was Alan Douglas.

His persona was of a spy who had fought in the Second World War, journeying into Serbia to gather knowledge on his enemies.

He could recall the feel of a neck being broken or the shape of a woman’s thigh. He could recall even breathing, hard, looking at Zaida below him upon the grass, the warmth of their

movements in rhythm together as the moon rose and the stars burned. But he couldn't remember why.

He was their leader now. He directed Kirman to become their doctor. He told Serira to prepare for war. He explained to Anista her role of guide since it was her voice they were following, even as she was here.

And by the fortieth day they had arrived.

There were two planets in view orbiting a star reminiscent their own. One was a brilliant burning desert sphere with a jagged dark wound etched along its surface.

Mary Marsden Rose in gazing at the scar said it was a continent floating in the sky, an impossible sight.

But it was there.

The other world was a great jasmine-blue sea stretching forever whose only other occupants were islands a trillion strong, each occupied by a living organic civilization.

Impossible as well of course.

Yet in examining the desert this too was bristling with life.

The song came from the desert, not the ocean.

And behind them crept the ship of their machine-brethren looking to take them home.

Suddenly there came the swiftly tilting oblivion of a storm.

The ship rocked as if struck by a furnace of stone and began to break apart. So too the machine vessel behind them.

Anista had only enough time to gather a few to her and head to the escape pods. She saw Alan take another and Asykos lead a few in his own refuge of escape.

She never saw the quiet Marchen Mordant as he gathered to him Sthenelaos and Ao'soasa and those others the colour of moonstone or shadow.

And she never saw those who did not escape in time.

Nor did she see the machine vessel as it was torn apart, its few rough survivors descending not to the desert but the ocean.

All she saw before consciousness left was the tilting oblivion of their shimmering ship as it was ripped to pieces and discarded to be burnt in the upper atmosphere, while downward they fell.

Into a forestless hell.

Part I.
Pestilence

Marchen Mordant's Story

Cool Tombs
Carl Sandburg

When Abraham Lincoln was shoveled into the
tombs, he forgot the copperheads and the
assassin . . . in the dust, the cool tombs.

And Ulysses Grant lost all thought of con men
and Wall Street, cash and collateral turned
ashes . . . in the dust, in the cool tombs.

Pocahontas' body, lovely as a poplar, sweet as a
red haw in November or a pawpaw in May,
did she wonder? does she remember . . . in
the dust, in the cool tombs?

Take any street full of people buying clothes and
groceries, cheering a hero, or throwing
confetti and blowing tin horns . . . tell me if
the lovers are losers . . . tell me if any get more
than the lovers . . . in the dust . . . in the cool
tombs.

Chapter 2

What did your face look like
before you were born?

There was the final shock of the ship crashing into stone.

The vessel like its parent had no form but shimmered like glass melted in summerlands and so when it hit the sheer wall did not crumple or break but smeared outward along the surface, cushioning them as it slowly slid downward toward the sands.

Mordant reached for his face first. He couldn't tell why.

Why begin there at the dark hair and dark eyes and the bridge of his nose? Nothing was broken.

But it was as if for the first time fear crept into him that these things could be sheered off him like an insect's skin.

Ao'soasa was beside him to his right and Sthenelaos to his left, Zelee behind, her raven-feathered hair matted to her face.

The ship's interior was dark, womblike. To maximize survival there were no chairs, no controls, just the diamond-glass of a screen to show them outside, their bodies protected in an invisible barrier like an ocean depth poured into a small room.

As the ship slung below to the sands this pressure ebbed away. When the ship reached its destination, it split open like a rotted apple and they walked out. It was impossibly bright.

That word he'd heard forever suddenly he began to understand. Impossible. That which could not *ever* happen.

Yet in gazing upward he saw them.

People were staring at them, people wearing garments to hide their faces, purple scarfs about their bodies making them the colour of liquid shadows.

"What happened?" It was Zelee who asked with her raven dark eyes suddenly awake, aware, as if for the first time.

"I don't know." Marchen realized he was the leader here. Douglas was gone, perhaps dead. Anista is gone, perhaps likewise. Ao'soasa, Zelee and Sthenelaos each could have led, should have led perhaps. Yet all eyes turned to him.

Why? Because they knew his story.

He had been the leader of the colony of Bunei where he had conducted horrific experiments, killing and destroying lives.

None of the others had such a resume or been capable of such cruelty. He had selected this persona and as a monster outranked them.

Worse, because he had been a monster though he could not remember why he was deemed the most human to lead.

Or perhaps it was all in his head.

Perhaps Zelee or Ao'soasa was leader and he was merely delusional in the thought all eyes turned to him.

High above the forms emerged, more and more violet heads creeping over the sheer tanned shape of the fingers of stone.

Then he watched as one of them put a hand to the wall, then another, and began to crawl down, head first, toward them.

Sthenelaos let his moonstone-coloured wings out. The xenixaran turned moth eyes toward those pursuing them and did not know what to do. Flee into the desert? Fight them?

Back on his homeworld, his people had been prey to large sluglike creatures, each larger than an elephant. His persona would have immediately flown away, gripped by a terrible panic at the unknown.

He stayed. They stayed.

Not even raising a hand to resist them as the cloaked figures descended, touched their faces and each fell into a deep sleep likened unto death . . .

Who?

Who are?

Who are you?

It was not sound Marchen heard. He was staring into darkness, feeling the unalterable heat of a summer without end and a patch of colour was seen out of the corner of his eye.

The colour was not language, not words. Yet he saw the colour meant something.

Patches of white and green, red, black, blue, violet, and orange rippled, and each pattern though not a word *was* a word.

Who?

Who are?

Who are you?

He struggled to speak but words failed him. He couldn't talk. He reached for his mouth but it wasn't there. There was a patch of taunt skin where his mouth was . . . no, not taunt skin. At first, his fingers groped and since he would not feel his mouth, he imagined it was not there. But it was. Yet it was wrong.

His blunted and smoothed teeth were serrated and he knew he would feel all of them at once.

He could touch his back molars as if his entire jaw jutted forward into the open air. The taunt skin he felt was his upper palate and surrounding this his teeth.

He looked at his hand, his hand rippling colour.

He was speaking through the language they employed.

I am Marchen Mordant, he said, his name now a symphony of reds, blues, greens. And the darkness gave way into light.

They were in a chamber of stone the colour of grey-bronze. Marchen was lying on the dais of a single slab of rock, above him his captors gazing into his eyes and into his skin.

He was naked, his uniform lying crumpled in a corner, a crumpled pile of white and green the only other hue in the entire world besides the stone which did not speak.

Sthenelaos was on another slab. Marchen could see his face. The xenixarans were an insect species that became humanlike, their faces composed of a great pair of small mandibles and two large moth eyes. His skin was the colour of moonstone. But though he looked the same as before some things were missing now.

The mouth was replaced by an empty maw lacking both the lower jaw and the chitin of his mandibles. Small serrated teeth jutted from this lampreylike opening and Marchen with horror realized he had been changed as well.

Yet even in this the horror diffused.

He felt terror, and glimpsed it briefly, yet though his new language had words for pain and fear he could not touch them yet.

The one standing over him likewise had no jaw. She looked human, almost, with sea-blue eyes and oddly light skin. Of course, it was pale now because a din of fear was clothing the words she spoke, her skin speaking terror even as she tried to speak with him.

Had she vocal cords her entire interview would have been one long uninterrupted scream.

But still, she asked him what he was, where he was from, where they were from, and so on until he answered her. And because of the nature of their speech, he couldn't deceive her in any way.

She knew his answers utterly just as the others were asked similar questions.

Finally, he asked why they had butchered them this way.

How else does one speak? she asked in a ripple of scarlet and black. By now he could not answer her this.

He hadn't a tongue anymore.

They were called the gwan fremoire and there were their homes in the Mountains of Tuchulcha. The mountains divided and spread across the entire world into a demon's maze elevated halfway in the sky.

The gwan fremoire were nomads who spent their lives crisscrossing the upper air between sky and ground maintaining vast networks of corridors and chambers for their kind to rest within during the intense heat of the day.

Or when the Gamaliel'Isa passed overhead.

He could see it, the underside of a continent swimming past, jagged shape like an egg ruptured at the edges into some edged dimension.

"What is it?" He smiled. Smiled? He knew as the patches on his skin lit up he smiled or tried to. But without a mouth, the action itself became speech, became question.

Became this.

"It is the domain of the l'Khal-Azriul," she said, she whose name was Eolra.

The l'Khal-Azriul?

The gwan fremoire's language made subtext impossible. Her name was not just Eolra but meant Strider. The l'Khal-Azriul was not simply syllables or a word but an intrinsic meaning.

"Devil," he smiled.

He was looking at the country of the king of hell . . .

Zelee opened her eyes, feeling her jaw dissolve away. Her birdlike mouth had become something else entirely but her raven-winged hands remained.

Her hands slender as a crane's bones were the product of a raven's wing separated into human-seeming fingers. Her wrist was flexible, infinitely more than a woman's and her fingers bent not merely one direction but four.

She reached out toward her captor, her thumb bending backward effortlessly and stared into the jasmine-blue eyes of she striding over her. No words were needed.

Zelee's skin was a perfect shade of pale black, an icy cool glance into the eyes of her captor.

Without a word, the patches of skin suspended in errant nothingness of being she was allowed to stand and stretch her legs, and with the subtle power of that dark-pale skin Zelee walked out into the light and spread her arms back as if preparing to fly.

But flight eluded her save when she had been a machine back on the old Earth. Here it was enough to spread her arms as if in the chance of flight.

"Why have you done this to me?" she asked, a river of grey running down her naked back.

"You must be able to speak," came the reply, she noting the contour of green along the upper brow just above the right eye.

The woman was slightly shorter than Zelee and oddly afraid, her body white with terror.

Zelee breathed as if for the first time, no, the second, her lack of a tongue making the entire experience even more surreal. Then was no moisture she realized, not just upon the land but within her mouth.

She reached her finger in and realized it felt dry and cold as an old fossil might.

Then the strangest thought came to her and she began to recite upon the cliff, there far above the seas of sand.

She spoke of the cool tombs, of Lincoln shoveled into death where he forgot even his assassin, or where Pocahontas, her body lovely as a poplar fell, or where the lovers were losers in the cool tombs.

In the language of the gwan fremoire the poem sinewed outward, then another and another as if each thread of some vanished race were a litany against terror.

But all this stopped when the woman spoke.

For the names were known, all of them were known, and suddenly Zelee felt her skin pale in direct reflection of her inquisitor.

Marchen came later to commune and to mourn . . .

Ao'soasa awoke. He looked up into eyes of blue and knew that his mouth was gone. But this was not a concern for him.

He never had a mouth before anyway.

His form fit oddly like mismatched clothes, the way a beggar's garment is tattered but kept for there'd be nothing else to use.

He had never been human, found alone on the small planet of a star system whose only occupant was the small planet he strode upon. He had been as mist, as fog, as sand, as stone.

Now he was flesh having come here for there were memories he did not understand.

His interrogator had left by now, he staring mutely at the ceiling when he felt something brush against his face, this naked pressure, this wind given depth. And he saw it appear to him.

A woman grew out of the wind, coalescing like steam into water. She was not like the others. She crept over him, studying him and whispered to him a word.

His skin rippled at the sound of this though he did not know why.

You.

You have.

You have returned, she tattooed deeply into his mind.

What am I? He shrugged, aware of the disconnect between his action and his desire.

You are a servant and messenger of the l'Khal-Azriul, she grinned.

Then sleep overtook him again.

Sthenelaos sat upon a cliff gazing at the world far below.

Beyond were cities. He could see them. The gwan fremoire mentioned those places where other beings dwelled.

The gwan fremoire was but one of several species native to Phyre.

"Why Phyre?" he asked.

"It is the name as given by the l'Khal-Azriul."

Meaning the other planet was Watyr. Obviously.

But Phyre and Watyr?

In his mind, he knew the proper spelling. Fire and Water. Yet the syllables and structure of their speech meant he saw them as Phyre and Watyr instead and due to the nature of their language recognized there was another intrinsic meaning behind them.

But the meaning eluded him at first.

The words meant Dajjal and Karna. Dajjal was Phyre and Karna was Watyr.

Devil he knew. And behind the word he saw each nuance of its being.

In his mind's eye two sets of realities existed now.

There was the machine and there was him.

He was terrified, his moonstone-coloured body a deeply whiter shade but behind this the machine mind, the source-mind.

It was why he had not asked immediately what had happened to the others or if they were the only survivors.

And there was the fact that he was not himself human.

A human would have asked perhaps, or panicked, but he was not and split between knowing abstractly what his people *might* do and being the product originally of a mechanistic mind had put away all concerns about the others to focus only on this.

Behind him came Mordant and Zelee. Ao'soasa was still in the chambers within the mountainside. The cliff was smoothed, a single flat surface with a sandstone wall separating it from the void below.

"Did they say where the others are?" Zelee asked.

"I haven't asked yet."

Zelee's skin rippled and the gwan fremoire replied.

No. They did not know.

Sthenelaos pointed a thin taloned finger to one of the cities in the distance.

"We should go there. We must explore."

"We have discovered living beings here," Mordant shrugged, smiled, no . . . he was not certain the gesture only the words. "We have achieved our aim. We have found life for the first time in forever."

"Impossible life," Sthenelaos sighed. "Life which is obviously artificial."

Taken aback by this the other three questioned him.

But all Sthenelaos had to do was wait for another of the gwan fremoire women with jasmine-blue eyes to arrive for the truth to become apparent.

It was the same woman. The identical height, identical shape and colour of the eyes, same length of fingers, same patterning of speech tattooing along their skin. So too each woman of the caravan wandering across the fingers of the mountain slopes.

This same woman existed in a multiplicity of identical forms.

The others had not noticed because all but one covered herself in robes of violet but Sthenelaos could sense them by smell and so knew they were the same.

And asking how they came to be they gave their cruel answer, or perhaps only cruel to them.

For down below in chambers deep within the mountain they were shown birth. There was a fungus there the colour of a bloated corpse, palely sliding along the walls. As Eolra touched it a face appeared with the same lamprey mouth, and same eyes and in a few moments breaking from the corpse-form was another gwan fremoire forged, naked and covered in a fine luminescent dew.

This was how the gwan fremoire gave birth.

This was how all life on Phyre conceived and gave birth.

"We should not linger here," Sthenelaos sighed. "We should find the others and together understand."

Later Ao'soasa joined them as they began to depart to the sands below as night came on with swift slender fingers of darkness descending then.

And with them went a woman with sapphire-red eyes made of mist, taking the shape of a lover out of Zelee's memories.

She gave her name as Gal-lu Balna. She called herself an i'ij. She called Ao'soasa this too.

Onward they went then, the gwan fremoire deciding against keeping the pestilence with them longer . . .

Chapter 3

The world of the kindness police

Gal-lu Balna led them during the night. As she led the way her body illuminated, turning herself into a flameless candle.

And she never ceased speaking, using actual words.

"So, you are the children of Earth," she said, to which Mordant replied with an alien language.

"My master wondered about you. He worries over all his children," she said.

The sand crunched like snow underfoot. Far behind them, mountains became grim titans, the outlines of giants sleeping in the dark for all eternity.

At a certain point Gal-lu grew weary of listening to their skins so turned them back, placing her hand over Ao'soasa's serrated mouth first as she began to intone.

The gwan fremoire denied changing them back, deeming this muting of them a butchery but far enough away Gal-lu decided it was time. Using the flesh-mechanics of some alchemy Ao'soasa felt his jaw bleed back into place. But though she did this she could not eliminate their colouration. Now when they spoke they would be speaking with more than words.

"Consider it a payment for wisdom."

"Thank you," Marchen said, his skin echoing the sentiment.

"Now, back to my talk about my master."

She spent an hour or more talking about the l'Khal-Azriul.

He was the lord of Phyre, the god-king who controlled all from the Gamaliel'Isa, the country of glass. It was named because his creations were there, beings born of glass, the only sentient race not conceived by the i'scairaja, "the all-consuming." This was the name given to the organism which created new life in the desert lands.

As she talked Marchen asked questions, as did Zelee but

Ao'soasa was silent, listening to the sounds of a creature who claimed to be the same as him. Sthenelaos in comparison was flying above them all, searching the nightlands which his moth eyes were capable of peering easily into the dark.

Marchen wished to understand what happened to the ship. Was her god-king responsible?

"The l'Khal-Azriul does not destroy ships . . . by tearing them apart." She left the last words linger as if for a special emphasis. "Had he been responsible I do not believe you would be here."

Zelee wished to know if any others had survived.

"I know of only one so far. My master found him in Kulkairos. If others have survived, I have not been told yet."

How could you know? Ao'soasa asked.

"With this."

The woman stopped, her scarlet hair freezing into place as if not hair but crystallized shards of ice untouched by the softly blowing wind, the white hems of her garments frozen into place as well as she put her palm up before them.

And there writhing beneath the skin of her hand something crawled.

It was like a worm but thinner, writhing furiously a moment and then just as suddenly becoming utterly still. It retreated then, moving from palm to wrist to forearm where it disappeared.

"This is an ascaliel," she said, "it is how we communicate on Phyre. The creature allows most to link to those divided by cocordran who are now on Watyr. But for us, since we are not divided but all linked to our maker it allows us to speak directly to him. By this, I know one of your number is with our master now and I know that all our brethren are seeking out the rest of you, but so far . . . no others have been found."

Who is with your master? Marchen asked.

"I do not know. Our master will not say who it is. Only that the one the master speaks to interests him greatly."

After another hour Zelee began to thirst. The i'ij recognized this and knelt upon the sand. She intoned, making a strange sound like rumbling thunder. And there in the distance they saw it.

A rounded hill was moving toward them but was no hill. Instead, a massive rounded giant was coming, sinewing sands about it, pushing through them with the ease of a shark crossing waves.

As it approached Gal-lu gave it a name. A sand whale she called it. It stopped several feet from where they were.

Gal-lu rose and then approached it.

She went to its urine-yellow eye which was easily wider than a man and whispered to it tenderly like a mother to a child.

Moments later it departed sinking below the dunes and moments later returned. It opened its massive mouth to reveal half a lake's worth of water it had separated from the desert by a row of blunt teeth the thickness of Mordant's arm.

Motioning to Zelee the i'ij approached and drank, cupping her hand to her mouth.

The raven-haired woman went and did likewise as did the others, all but the xenixaran still swimming the upper air.

Then the beast departed quickly as it came.

"Below the sands is an ocean," she explained, "which the sand whales occupy. There are small rivulets which bleed up close enough for them to drink without having to dig so close to the world's heart."

Then she continued speaking of her master with Zelee's thirst quenched, and the others, all save Sthenelaos whose eyes kept turning onward toward the farther shore . . .

They approached the city of Rioryh as the sun began to rise. It was composed of great malachite spires blunted to cubes as if someone had simply scattered the half-finished remnants of an unadorned monument here, little caring where or why.

And all the time Marchen Mordant and the others kept wondering what happened to them.

The ship seemed a distant memory now. Were they still machines they could have recalled in infinite detail everything but now they only had only the mask of their personas to guide them.

But what might their masks mean here?

Were I a man would I know how to act or what to say? Marchen thought to himself, his every idea etched along his flesh, tattooing himself with his indecisions. Zelee was likewise, while Ao'soasa had even greater questions yet the words knotted wickedly in his throat and on his body for he was separated by what he had been and by the gulf of what he might be now.

Only Sthenelaos seemed aware enough to question their guide, to finally feel something his persona would have known intimately.

Paranoia. Wariness. Fear.

But even now he could not articulate this exactly for had not all of them come from a world without lies, without deceit, meaning though they possessed what seemed infinite age they were as children here.

Rioryh was a massive city and upon the streets, they saw a man walking, or men, for all of them were the same man moving in concert one with another.

"The children of Rioryh," she said as if this explained everything.

Then she walked over to a clump of grass, itself the colour of malachite jutting from a corner of a building. Before them all, she idly pulled at it and they heard it.

They heard a scream.

The building itself vibrated and Mordant saw portions of the walls suddenly gifted of faces. The building was alive, as were the streets and the men who were but the outcroppings of the city itself, all born likewise from the i'scairaja all-consuming corpse-flower which blossomed in the under-country below the

world. And now they were here, stepping as into the maw of the great beast . . .

The children of Rioryh were each a portion of their city and themselves. If born as a man they were the same man but over time they'd switch. If they stayed in one place too long their feet would root into the ground and those nearby buildings or streets would begin to subsume them, consume them until there was nothing left save faces, sometimes, sometimes when they were about to scream.

But as this happened to one another would be freed, regaining limbs and lives, and granted the chance to escape.

As such one never knew when they might be imprisoned or freed so the only hope one was to keep moving ceaselessly and even as sleep would overwhelm each would curse their bodies' failure to forever stay awake.

Into this realm Gal-lu led the exiles, mentioning here would be a place to rest their heads for the beast city could not consume them nor would it dare try in the presence of a messenger of the l'Khal-Azriul.

They were safe to begin and to prepare.

"To prepare?" Mordant asked.

"My master has decided you must be brought into his court in the higher lands. From here the way has been chosen which will lead you where my master is."

Were I a man would I know to be afraid? he thought to himself. His skin shimmered like burnished bronze, then paled.

He was a man, or becoming one. The word had not yet emerged, the word composed of fear. But it was coming, coming faster as night neared.

Because Rioryh was not built but grown the rooms were jaggedly unfinished and the bed moaned as Zelee rested her body upon it. It whispered, begging to become her or she become it.

She fell asleep in seconds.

The whispering seemed almost a lullaby.

She had dreams before. Forty days in the shimmering ship she dreamed, but this was different. As light poured in, diffused by groaning shutters she was confronted by something new whose skin and shape was a nightmare.

A skin and shape diseased.

Before her dreams were edited by the ship itself and by the uncertain pool of imagining what dreams were. For before as a machine Zelee never slept nor ever needed rest and even as a living woman aboard the vessel dreams were things controlled.

Not so here.

It would be easy to make the dream prophetic or provide some purpose behind it as if at last she began to see how life was.

Of course in truth dreams are simply random having no logic nor reason to them. In sleep, she was a mouse then a giraffe then ate ice cream then had sex with Marchen then had sex with the identical form of herself then thought Anista had turned into a giant beetle and all the machines had once been insects imagining they were men and women when they had devoured them all millennia earlier and then simply forgot.

Such things are merely random and are not meant to be taken as prophetic or a foreshadowing of things to come.

Meanwhile in the next room Ao'soasa listened as Gal-lu continued her speech upon the special virtues of their master and in yet another Marchen retired to bed, slightly aware of the speech of Gal-lu and were he paying attention might have heard Zelee moaning in the night.

He lay upon the bed as if all before him had been a dream and only now reality existed finally. The bed whispered his name to him. He opened his eyes.

In sleep, he had been on the ship wandering the corridors listening to Zelee trying to sing and in that same moment had been on Bunei vivisecting a child. And the child had a name.

Always before in playing Marchen he had seen the child from above, staring down at her upturned face silently screaming.

He had felt nothing then. He had felt nothing upon the ship. He felt something now. The bed whispered his name to him. Using her voice. He was straddling the body of his victim. She was here cradling his form. She was calling his name to him. The silent scream was silent no longer.

He was unable to move, feeling her caressing his body like a maw about to swallow its prey whole, her tongue composed of her entire form licking hungrily at him and he paralyzed felt his chest slowly flower open the way certain blossoms unfurl to reveal their seeds within.

And nothing was real before this, only now was anything real happening. All was an illusion before; only now was he actually existing. About to die.

He was transposed with his victim and she had taken the form of the bed he was lying on. Then suddenly the malachite bed turned sideways shifting and suddenly a man grew out of it while Marchen became the thing he lay upon. He was unable to see or hear or scream yet was screaming still.

He was on the fields of Bunei ordering mothers raped beside their daughters, ordering sons castrated and suddenly it was no longer a tome. *He was there.*

He was compelling the dying to die and the wretched to live. It passed and he found himself lying on the floor.

The bed was gone.

He staggered to wakefulness, truly terrified of sleep like any damned soul, listening to Zelee moan and Gal-lu preach while he heard himself mourn suddenly.

He wished he could be any other person in creation but that ability was gone. The ship was dead and even if it wasn't he'd know, now and forever. He'd always be Marchen Mordant now.

Chapter 4
Early promise seldom
met in time

Those of Rioryh the exiles learned about.

Each comprised a life yet each comprised a life before.

In the state of the transformation of sleep, a bed might remember being someone else or a wall recall the scent of jasmine or thrust of a blade into warm flesh.

At those moments of utter surrender, each was suddenly given vision of a second life superimposed beneath the first thin membrane of who they were now.

One in particular who had been a wall recalled a terrible thing.

When Zelee heard it, it terrified her to the quick.

"I remember being a scarecrow," he began, "a scarecrow suspended in time. In that state I lingered, incapable of moving, waiting. Always waiting for the moment to end which never would.

"I saw in this state black stone obelisks each no larger than a man, each listening, *always* listening. Never ceasing to do this terrible thing.

"They each chose a person to linger by, to hear all the secrets of their days. And I was a scarecrow, my body tattered rags suspended in their company but mute and silent as the grave.

"In time metallic roses and grass as sharp as spines beneath forests all of needles emerged. In time there were oceans of black oil where swam segmented bodies of wormlike engines churning the oceans to keep them all from becoming seas of tar.

"And in time after all the creatures of myth fled away I remained to watch as the sun enveloped the sky, a red ocean of fire which licked and tore at the continents, blistering all to glass.

"Then nothing. Nothing at all.

"Then I awoke here."

She was taken aback for she had seen this. The world spoken of was not Earth but the world of her birth and she had observed a scarecrow with tattered dung-coloured rags crucified beside fields the colour of shale.

The malachite-coloured man speaking had been sentenced to this fate like so many others.

She was standing before a murderer, standing before the man who killed her.

Not he of course, no, for that man when sentenced had suffered the pangs of loss after her departure, no, this was another.

Yet for the first time, the merest imagining that he *was* the man was enough for her to feel . . . something.

What she was not completely sure.

It was as if in listening to one then another compelled to speak because their guide all turned upon the gyre just for her, to motivate her to some dream-logic . . . but it failed her and instead she went walking the streets leaving the others behind.

She, the Zelee of before, had only lived twenty alien years on an alien soil. Her body should have lasted a century or more but she perished, caught in the thought-web of the machines, a mask perfectly preserved to be picked up and worn by the woman walking now.

There were other stories of course. One named Rheren mentioned being a sailor upon scarlet seas dying in the mouth of a storm. Saklas died climbing the cliffs of an alien world, his body broken and left lingering, never found. Kharisiria died suddenly, her heart broken when the shard of glass pierced it. Now here she was not she, and yet . . .

Yet he remembered being she.

Sthenelaos was right, all this was artificial but by what logic no one could discern. Gal-lu explained nothing for to her the world was simply the world. The children of Rioryh could explain nothing since one does not take into account a dream as anything more. And Marchen and company could explain nothing for they

had no tools, no insight, no guidance, and were not even really the people they pretended to be.

Who are we then? Sthenelaos whispered inside, listening to the people talk, realizing they were speaking a language he did not know and yet perfectly understood.

We are just things of myth, Something said.

It was not he who said this, or they.

He glanced at Gal-lu. They were standing at a crossroads, this broad avenue with throngs passing by, many of them stopping to speak about their dreams, often without even knowing why.

Only as things could they recall the logic as being sound. Here it was as if a mad king had simply given a strange order and recognizing the madness of the king decided to humour him rather than risk extermination.

So, they passed by giving vent their fantasies to these strangers but still there lingered the fear. This Sthenelaos could be seen quite clearly. Then the words came to him again.

We are the things of myth.

He glanced to the sky but the sky did not answer him, nor was it them, nor her. It was the l'Khal-Azriul speaking. He was certain of it, addressing him, giving him only these few words.

Just as suddenly it stopped.

As if on cue the people withdrew as if given an unseen command.

Gal-lu mentioned something vague about them needing to reach a caravan to take them someplace else.

Marchen said yes and soon enough Zelee returned.

And they prepared to leave the city of the afterlands.

Moth eyes noticed the young girl shivering even in the heat.

He asked as they walked the avenues what was wrong but she couldn't say. It was the lives shown here, early promises of something cut taut and fine.

Were she older perhaps she might be able to explain . . .

Chapter 5

World without walls

They needed passage to another city. It was impossible, (there that word again,) for them even to be here. Days before had been the ship then each of them as if invisibly commanded here.

Now here they could not even say why. The logic of their reasoning deserted them.

Departing the city Marchen noticed an aspect of the people left behind he had not seen before. For as they left each of the men turned and placed something over their faces.

"Masks," Gal-lu explained to him. The masks were how they differentiated one another.

Some wore the golden faces of birds or fish. Others wore insects or the wasp faces of stranger things.

Some took on the likeness of crows or cranes.

All wore golden masks which Gal-lu said were their true faces. They had removed them in the company of the pestilence so as not to be seen for by removing their guises all were the same and so it was felt the exiles could not have corrupted them.

"How can we corrupt them?" Sthenelaos asked.

"By being," she curtly said and they went on their way but as they did Zelee noticed something else along her arm.

Always before the colours of their speech had been fixed, green and red and blue, never mingling exactly, never blue-red or green-purple. But as they exited the city preparing to board some organic thing meant to carry them on, she noticed her skin.

And the malachite stains upon it.

It was speech but the flavour of the words was wrong as if some new hues were added, as if she were given more words, no, the finer definition of the words which she was compelled to say.

How can we corrupt them? she asked. *They have already corrupted us.*

And then they went on their way.

Gal-lu explained that they were being directed toward Taiwaith, the country of the i'ij but before they reached it they would arrive upon the continent of glass in orbit in the sky.

But first they would have to go to Xoriesaria, the city of the artists.

Beyond the malachite haze of the city, the sand whale lay.

Sthenelaos noticed it first, rounded hill of a body waiting patiently for them. The sand whale loomed like a titan half-submerged in the sand. Striding up to its rounded body they watched as the rough-scaled skin remodelled itself forming a staircase for them to climb.

Straddling the upper ridge of its body chairs formed which each took, all save the xenixaran who still lingered in the sky, ever watchful his skin littered still of malachite signs.

Onward the beast roared, the sound of its movement in concert with the rumbling thunder of its voice.

Gal-lu led it on then, aiming toward the city of the artists, and from there eventually the country of the demon-kind.

As they sailed on, the sand whale more a vessel than a beast they noticed upon the sands strange brilliant plants rising and falling away. These were like small reeds or slender grass, each golden-dark and riddled with small japphire eyes. Moving among them Sthenelaos could see small sticklike forms moving, winnowing between the reeds.

These were the tcshenai, bright-bodied creatures who moved through time and then moved again.

He knew the names of them but didn't know how he knew nor was aware of how in watching them he understood their movements through time.

It was as if a symphony were suddenly poured into his head and he drinking these words like darkling wine knew both the flavour of them and their intent just as music could be understood without its words ever becoming clear.

The tcshenai with a broken rhythm moved forward and back, choosing their age, choosing the next day they would be old or older or young or never-born.

They chose this, their first emergence from the chrysalis of the all-consuming giving them free reign to scrawl their own life's design upon the sands they occupied. And their dominion of the small grasses likewise obeyed their command, their world the same age as they, no older and no younger now.

All this Something revealed to Sthenelaos without ever using words.

And all the time the malachite scales of some obscure dialect clothed and covered half his face as the sand whale skimmed along, the exiles obedient as a child in the presence of the unknown servant of an unknown king.

Ao'soasa had the most questions but also the hardest time deciding what to say. The previous day he had listened as she explained the purpose of their race. They were made to be the emissaries of the l'Khal-Azriul, capable of adapting to any shape or form.

He wanted to ask how he escaped or been lost or found but not by them or why for millions of years no sign of Phyre had ever been found. Where had been this world till today?

But he said nothing, skin alone saying what he never could.

Yet in the dark of a new day, (for only in the darkness could one survive the heat,) he did try to articulate some semblance of what he wanted to say.

Zelee had her questions too.

She gazed along the sand seas uncertain why she'd come. Before, and there was a before, she had been granted omniscience or the closest thing to it. As a machine she had consumed worlds of knowledge, spent eternity without ever feeling heat or cold.

Now though her skin shimmered as it shivered, speaking of something unfathomable.

Pain.

She was thirsty again. But she had only drunk a day ago, a night ago. And she was cold.

At first, she didn't even know the word. She knew what that other Zelee felt but when the first Zelee shivered though the machine saw she did understand.

Now she shivered in the cold as desert winds blew past and marvelled at her discomfort. Was this cold then?

It seemed incredible but it was so.

On the ship, she had never felt true cold and as a machine her infinite bodies had been impossible to harm.

She could have walked across the surface of the sun without ever feeling the subtle shiver of the heat, she could have walked the vales of the moon where no sunlight ever reached and never once shiver a single shiver of the cold.

Now she shook.

Upon the bed she had been feverish from the deafening heat and now as the horizon spread all behind them, and about them she shook, her bones aching at the touch of the naked wind.

And onward they sped toward this city of artists who most likely would all look identical.

Why had she come and compressed herself down into this raven-fingered form? She glanced at a slender hand which was once the wing-bones of a bird now giving the impression of feathers though it was only darkened skin. And even this wasn't true.

Black raven-feathered hands gave way to shades of blue malachite as if the world had taken the truth of her hands.

Turning she saw Marchen sleep as if he'd not slept the day before. Surely the bed had been comfortable enough.

Yet his eyes lolled listlessly against the shores of an invisible ending . . . she stopped herself, listening to her inner speech. Invisible ending?

Glancing toward the insects in the distance, watching them shift into and out of their forms, still disappearing forever as if

they never were she wondered if the unseen king were speaking to her.

No, Something whispered. Nothing was speaking to her, just keep watching the sand pass by and listen to the sound of the wind and the sky. Just keep on being guided by that servant of mine . . . forget those last two words. Please.

Zelee glanced back to Marchen uncertain of the reason why, hoping he were awake to comfort her. As for Ao'soasa the bland features of the stout, thick-bodied man did not give her pause for pleasure or feeling of intimacy.

His eyes were turned toward his guide.

Only Sthenelaos was still awake of her company and glancing down nestled beside her, mentioning some words he'd imagined hearing as he sailed a dark sea of a shadow-touched sky.

So, they spoke of words implied as slowly the malachite scales grew brighter while hours and hours in the desert without boundary kept walking by.

It was as if the entire planet were naked now, a predatory beast watching them and waiting when the last barrier would fall, waiting when they forgot ever being anyone except Sthenelaos and Zelee and Marchen and Ao'soasa and then the beast's jaws would be unfurled to swallow and take them down into the pits to be born again with faces not their own.

It was such a simple thing, the replacing of one mask for another, if only . . . if only they would simply forget . . .

Zelee recalled the cool continents of Earth nestled beside oceans of black, oils of tar, and Sthenelaos whispered to the sky an old calculation made by humans never to be solved, till the coming of humanity's children.

But the wind stepped back as if patient, as if saying *"All right, continue as you are. I have all time and no barrier can stop me if given time."*

In the distance after many hours in silence came bristling lights of a farther shore and a city growing upward from the legs

of a spider god.

“We have arrived,” she sang. “We have come to the city of Xoriesaria.”

Chapter 6

I walked across the
sacred sphere

The mountains had been fingers of stone etched into the sky and the city of the children of Rioryh had been unfinished carved blocks like malachite titans strewn about the sands.

The city of the artists was something else entirely.

When the sand whale departed back the way it came Marchen was confronted by a sight he couldn't completely understand. Certain buildings had taken the shape of people. The city was composed of various colours, spiralling towers curling into the sky leading to minarets while others were rounded artificial hills in a cityscape.

At first, they assumed all the people had one shape but this was not entirely true. Yes, the people wore masks but beneath the masks was something else entirely.

All the people had the same tiger eyes. This was the same.

Some were women, some were men and some were children, some boys, and some girls.

They were reiterations of a theme of course but the theme was varied.

Take the children of Jaireb for example.

In appearance, they seemed to be women with tiger eyes and they were pale, yes, as white as frost. But otherwise, they differed. Some were older, some younger, some infants carried by what Marchen imagined to be their mothers, some grandmothers.

The children of Jaireb however seemed closer to spiders than women for even though they had translucent skin, two arms, two legs, hands, fingers, and toes, (he assumed,) they had eight tiger eyes arranged in a small band about their foreheads and when they spoke it was the like the vibrations of a violin or stands of silk struck taunt on some alien instrument.

Others practiced an art upon themselves.

He watched one artist whose name was Oriecea place herself within a tomb of clay. And he felt her drowning through the grasping of his own throat, the clay washing over him and drowning him until he imagined he was buried, dying, dead, and then the young woman with the skin the colour of yellow parchment emerged again and there was silent applause.

Another Zelee saw.

A painter named Kalirjlra slowly buried herself in ink then strode to a far wall and impaled herself upon it, paint like mosaic tiles hardening, turning her emerald skin to still-breathing glass, still aware, reduced now to an image of a man on a far hill gazing across a sunset of three suns.

Zelee felt her own body paralyze, mosaic tiles creep along her flesh and imagine her entire life stopped at the moment of another's creation, an unbreathing, unthinking thing without regard even for its maker.

Then the painter freed herself, the painting dissolved into shards upon the stony temple floor just as suddenly unstained of a new tattoo, stone skin suddenly naked where once something, even for a moment, stood against it.

Sthenelaos watched a sculptor at work who slowly took the dead body of a jaguar and began to shape it, smooth the fur, peel back the claws until after an hour it was a woman.

Where the jaguar came from Sthenelaos did not know nor how the gold and black patches of her skin shifted to a pale emberlike frost.

Had they all been born this way?

No. For below in the underlands on the other side of the reflection of the city, the all-consuming corpse flower bloomed, giving birth to them.

But as artists they knew how to vary a theme and even in a world where all could be a single form or shape out of the artist's eye new possibilities emerged.

Gal-lu led them on with a song, passing painters became their paintings, writers became the books they would write.

And all the time Marchen heard the scream.
It was slow at first, low at first, getting stronger all the time.

Her scream. The child's scream.

He itched terribly at the sound, his back feeling rounded by the tongue of some unnatural lusting god but he said not a word as they were led through the throng of artists, passing ziggurats and minarets and spires curving with ammonite design as if the shell stretched upward into space slendering like grass in a hailstorm.

Eventually, they stopped before a temple.

It had twelve pillars before the gates coloured gold and black like a wasp's skin, each larger than a man, and the pillars swam up seemingly against the sky though in truth they were only twenty feet or more. But the perception of the place meant they seemed to go on forever even if all knew this wasn't true.

They were led inside.

Inside were idols devoted to the l'Khal-Azriul. Some gave him wings, some presented him as a lion-headed serpent coiling about his own body, peering greedily at his worshippers.

Another statue showed him wearing a mask of gold and the face on the mask looked familiar, but none could say why.

Tlyuaddi the priest was there.

How did Sthenelaos know the name?

The priest was a woman with eight eyes and six fingers jutting from a hand and both her mouths smiled.

While passing from the gallery of the unknown king to the pools below the priest said several adherents had come. She even mentioned in passing Balangijal . . . no. *Balanqijal*, an endradi knight who had made pilgrimage here and whispered of a quest he had to fulfil.

He was seeking after someone she explained, Gal-lu listening intently, focusing the others to listen as well . . . a man who spoke too often in jest.

At this, Marchen stopped.

When was this?

Several days ago, heading in the direction of . . . but suddenly her voice failed as if directed to say nothing more.

Then they arrived in the half-darkness, chambers illuminated by a phosphorescent fungus that would become new living things.

There were pools here, each no larger than four times a man, and Sthenelaos counted three, close enough to see.

The chamber itself loomed in the dark beyond, the roof so far above even his eyes could not tell its proper dimension, eyes which had seen an entire landscape beneath a moonless night.

But then of course they had not been *his* eyes. The priest said some were to step into the pool to commune.

To commune with what?

"What do you think?" She replied.

Marchen chose as did Zelee and Ao'soasa.

Sthenelaos declined. He had had enough communion with the unseen god of this world without walls and he claimed he wished to see more of the artistry above, which was true for his skin said the same.

But he would wait for them. Just in case. Those words.

As the others stripped and wandered into pools the colour of a dull ocean those three words crept back into him.

Just in case.

As a machine, there was need for such a thought. It did not matter how the body fared or mind decayed. The Sea of Thought was ageless and eternal, they merely teardrops in that ocean.

Now there was the possibility of . . .

He could not speak it but the priest mouthed *the word* making a malachite tattoo along his arm.

"Death," she whispered.

Sthenelaos winced having wished he said the word himself.

The others quiet as obedient children waded in and dissolved beneath the pools where they came and confronted the

god of all the world.

Or perhaps merely all this was some trap, some parasitic plant leading insects to its maw, hopeful and waiting for the sensation of flesh to be devoured in its blind glances.

Impossible to say until after the audience was done . . .

Zelee found herself upon the plains of home staring at an obelisk staring at her, its four smooth faces turning to see her.

It was uncertain what they were or from where they came.

They simply were.

And it was listening to her even as she wasn't speaking, as if attentive to her silence.

Why couldn't she speak?

She reached for her throat; *cut*. She had been murdered. So dead she turned from the obelisk watching her murderer dragged away, pieces of him falling to grass as he was lifted to a frame, arms outstretched, eyes rotted away now, leaving him become rags and bones melted like ice in a summerland always screaming, never ceasing, till frozen in time.

She turned and turned in the maddening gyre of the fields and felt that terror cats know in the night to be stalked by some predatory thing impossible to escape from

And it came whispering, that voice out of time . . .

Always screaming, never ceasing, not until she was frozen and become a scarecrow staring as the sun turned a scarlet eye, its maw opening wide to devour all world and self and sky . . .

Marchen saw the dead peoples of Bunei.

His soldiers rounded them up, slaughtered them and now some were making necklaces of bones and teeth. He among them. He never felt guilt or grief before. Such words did not exist to him and even the machine still uncertain of what they meant knew they meant something his persona never achieved in life.

But guilt clung to him now.

Bunei had been a human world, colonized to become a garden ripe for twenty planets more.

Instead, Marchen had decided to proclaim himself a god and set to work designing a new society according to his standards, his laws, and his morality.

But he had none.

Now here at the fields of slaughter watching young men pry teeth from corpses' jaws Marchen felt it finally, the full disgust of being this unfinished thing posing as a human being.

And the wind went whispering, but it was no wind.

And as a young child cried from the mound of corpses it straddled a young soldier aimed and was about to fire Marchen cried out *stop*.

He was shaken by the words he used for he had not said such words before, but then he had only been reading life. Now he was writing it. *Becoming it*.

The wind became a shadow whispering its darkness along the grass and he felt the darkness grin at him.

His legs gave way.

He fell and what was worse none were there to pick him up. He imagined they would but they hadn't, they were too preoccupied with the dead to care about the living, even their god-king anymore.

He lay beside grey hills of the dead piled like cordwood and remembered and then uncontrollably almost wept.

Almost. He wasn't there yet.

But given time, and time, and time . . .

Ao'soasa saw his brethren in Taiwaith. There was a country beside an ocean of salt, a continent of salt known as Tlirija where vampiric things fed upon the very crystals themselves draining them of what they were, slowly turning to water.

He saw mists become shadow and shadow become flesh and flesh become stone and heard them issuing out the maelstrom of themselves commands fired not from their hand but another.

And he had escaped or been sent, sent yes, waiting somewhere far away, waiting for this moment to return, never knowing why or how or even when.

The storm continued a pace and he was alone, his human body suddenly failing and frail as it turned to mist and sand and clay and he felt himself drowning just as the artist had done, just as the voice whispered to him, *"It will be alright, just let it be, let it be, just let your dying be . . ."*

And the thought of his demise kept getting stronger and stronger in his mind . . .

Beyond the pools Sthenelaos watched.

Far in the distance darkness loomed as if there were deeper countries his eyes could not see, as if giants were wandering the infinite black beyond.

"How vast is this gallery?" he asked.

Gal-lu replied it was as wide as the world. After all this was a chamber of the l'Khal-Azriul, his place of communion.

"And after here where are we going?"

Wherever our king directs.

"Where exactly is that?"

Vologoesia she said.

Sthenelaos was caught on what to do. He could stay, watching them in their 'communion,' stepping in when it became too much. But *what* was too much? Were he the Sthenelaos from before he might know but nothing like this had ever happened to *that* living soul.

How was he to respond?

Out of the darkness, he saw it then. Himself.

A xenixaran came creeping up from the dark with the same abyss-black eyes, the same antenna jutting from his forehead, same moonstone wings jutting from his back.

The priest said nothing nor Gal-lu, both so intently focused upon the pools.

The shadow Other-Sthenelaos approached, coming inches from his face as if studying a portrait or reflection.

"Hello," Sthenelaos said.

Hello.

"What are you?"

Sthenelaos.

"But I am Sthenelaos."

Are you?

And he thought about this carefully and then answered in the affirmative.

What is Sthenelaos? it asked.

"I am a xenixaran."

What is Sthenelaos? it asked.

"I am Sthenelaos."

What is Sthenelaos? it asked.

"I am . . . alive."

At this it caught his wrist with its hand then twisted bodily so he saw the back of its head as with a single motion it stepped back into him.

He saw the back of the skull rise into his eyes, saw nothing, then saw everything through the sight of his alternative as if there was no point where the other was and he.

They were now the same. But he felt no different.

There was no epiphany here, no great lost truth.

He felt oddly cold, disgusted, annoyed . . .

Irritated.

That was the word writing itself along his skin like a malachite wire.

Suddenly he wanted desperately to grab Gal-lu by her nonexistent throat and strangle her, to rip the smile from the priest or scream or laugh or feel that terrible uncertain way the world shifts beneath your feet when everything is lost and nothing can ever be regained.

In a heartbeat he cursed silently, his body speaking what he'd said inside.

I have eyes like your eyes, he said, I hate like you hated.

It all seemed a terrible farce suddenly, their exile into sand, their reconnaissance into a mismatched city of strange things masquerading as people. And why? What was the point of it all? To meet and reach some damned thing, to play these games the shadows play when the light has fled.

He left them there and went above, unconcerned if any lived or died.

The lie had become a truth at last.

He had imagined doing this before, that he would simply walk up those stairs and move among the artists now.

Yet he hadn't moved, not till he had been confronted by . . . he couldn't say what.

Yes, he could. It was his own apathy, the distinction between the thinking and the act.

He had claimed to go before for there was nothing else to do. Now he wished to go. To hell with the rest of them.

So, he went and for an hour did not care if they lived or died, spending his time watching sculptors turning flesh to clay or becoming paintings or even the dreamers of the K'myrim who shed their dreams chrysalislike into the waking world.

He saw a woman with tiger eyes making love to herself, the illusion straddling above the street far enough to be seen by all.

Another dreamed he was crucified or torn to glass shards in an empty storm and even this rain Sthenelaos felt for a while.

Then he noticed mechanical bodies moving among the crowds, women and men whose movements the machine could tell instinctively were not from any living thing.

Just as quickly they were gone.

After an hour he returned, satisfied and almost hoping they were dead, somehow saddened and yet paradoxically relieved to find them all unhurt, drying themselves beside the pale grey pools.

He knew the reason for his disgust.

In that other life, idiocy annoyed him.

The only thin thread to all he knew had just potentially sacrificed themselves to dying because they were told to by a stranger, and knowing they were going to meet this unknown king none of them elicited the smallest panic save those runic malachite shapes along their skin.

It was as if all rationality had been cut out of them.

Suddenly Sthenelaos wanted desperately to strike them all for their stupidity but stopped himself, not because he did not know what to do but because they *were* the only thin thread back to all the world he knew.

And because he loved them.

Those damned fools, he thought, his skin saying in a heartbeat all the things he wanted to but until now never could.

It was as if he'd crossed the world in an afternoon.

The Sthenelaos who greeted them was someone else, better or infinitely worse. Yet as he glanced to them, he knew.

They weren't the same people anymore either.

Of this, he feared.

Chapter 7
Life from the other
side of clouds

They spent seven days in the city of the artists waiting for passage to Vologoesia. The sand whales would not go there and so they would have to wait for a winged messenger to come.

And all the time Sthenelaos realized the terror of the thing he was before. Not the terror of once being nor the terror of once being Sthenelaos or remembering Sthenelaos or struggling to remember the echo whose skin he was living through.

The terror was when he was a machine.

Strange that, if seen from the other side.

On the first night, he wheeled in the sky and felt the cool fires of the clouds burn the edges of his wings. He almost screamed but stopped himself from doing so.

That first night he had sex with a woman who had tiger eyes and spoke like the threads of a violin. He felt her pressing against his body looking down at him and each thrust was like the outpouring of a new continent being discovered.

He knew of sex, catalogued it the way one might catalogue an especially interesting species of moth, yet never knew what it was to fly. So too was it here.

Her name was Sanalo Caal and she was a sculptor who drowned herself in clay to know the way she would shape it.

Her room was this unfinished emptiness comprising a bed and a table colour of black salt located on the second floor of a building that looked like a snail shell half-devoured.

He had met, they had spoken and less than an hour later he was here, wings pressed into rough fabric, head paralyzed gazing at her, his body disobediently trapped.

He knew his people couldn't climax the way humans could. There should have been no sensation except his body was altered to correspond with the common denominator of the crew, making him just human enough to enjoy it.

Afterward, they slept.

No romance, no loving caress, no concern over some vaunted morality. She explained in the morning she'd never tried to enjoy something like him and now she would try something else.

He didn't know if this meant he had not impressed her or if she was so impressed repeating their performance would be a downward spiral.

So, in the morning he left.

The point was had he still been a machine he would have *experienced* her the way a lens turns a once blurred image into a masterpiece for a myopic eye, and yet. And yet.

Had he still been a machine he would have perceived her the way a human might perceive a virus, infinitely small and though capable of being perceived never communicated with.

Back on Earth, he was more than a god for what was a god if not power personified sans death or disease or old age?

Yet having never felt pain he never felt pain.

Strange to think that with those runic tattoos damning themselves along his skin.

The fact was pain was the only lens that lessened everything as it brought everything into perspective.

The moment he hungered he went to satisfy it, feeding on corpse-flowers in the underlands below. And the moment hunger ceased something astonishing happened without he at first understanding why. Then he realized that until his death he'd always know his hunger would stalk him as a predatory beast and he would never extinguish it no matter how much he ate.

The luscious flesh-textured feast would only delay the inevitable, not end it. So too sleep. So too sex.

So too weariness or boredom or hatred or scorn. All these things delayed the inevitable and kept back the final darkness for only a minute season.

Life was measured not by achievement but by the absence of achievement. Each day one did not suffer, each day one did not experience pain was a further victory, a finer taste of heaven.

He walked seemingly forever, collapsing twice in a bustling street aware even if he rose he could not rise forever. All existence was the end of doing and the achievement of life the act of not doing all that could be done.

There were whole countries of experience no life ever wished for, whole labyrinths of desires and depravities one counted themselves infinitely fortunate to avoid.

As a machine, he could have walked the desert forever oblivious to time or fear. Without purpose.

For though life was the act of delay, golden decline of keeping the abyss from swallowing one whole, life as a machine was an unbroken line. One day bled into another seamlessly and everything was possible but nothing explained. As a machine Sthenelaos would never ask why he was, *he was*, a godlike figure straddling among other godlike immortals who had reached the end of perfection and with nothing else to climb toward regressed or worse remained as they were, an unchanging multitude.

Perfection was its own prison he realized.

Even hell was preferable. Hell changed.

Ao'soasa saw the countries of his kind, saw Taiwaith as she described it, as the pool defined it and as the voice divined it.

Ao'soasa needed more imagination.

Having been led along like a small child till now Gal-lu gave him free reign to explore a bit, as if unconcerned, as if he couldn't get hurt.

He spent that first night staring at paintings whose painters were trapped within them and watched writers become imprisoned in the books they wrote.

The city was stone and sandstone and blackstone and whitestone and covered in tapestries depicting the history of the city as if its history were buried in the tapestry, tapestry buried in

the city and the city buried again in its own history, creating a circle without end.

That first night he'd watched a javelin thrower fire his darts into mute bodies of clay forms. A crowd gathered, few of the K'myrim dreamers, some children of Jaireb, and even a girl with a cat made of blue fire crouching upon her shoulders; afterward Ao'soasa stood staring at the ground as the javelin thrower came.

He wore grey silk about his throat and arms, a grey wind now taken form and half clothing a man.

Ao'soasa introduced himself and the grey-wind man nodded and bowed. Ao'soasa did likewise, not entirely certain why.

He said his name was Karkomak and he was i'ij.

Ao'soasa said he was an i'ij as well, travelling with Gal-lu.

"Ah, I thought as much," he said and drew the uncertain man aside.

They walked a time from the rounded opening to the crossroads where archers and duellists played to a small café, Karmomak motioning to a man with tattoos of . . . *something*, on his arms and face.

"So, what do you know of our kind?" he asked.

And Ao'sosa explained. The i'ij were servants of the l'Khal-Azriul, the god-king of Phyre, they the messengers of his will, emissaries of his actions and desires. They existed from his thoughts and were destined to return into them to become in time the shadows of his flesh. They were the host of Phyre, the unseen lords to their unseen king.

And then Ao'soasa heard something extraordinary.

Karkomak laughed.

He did not simply laugh with his voice or body, rather it was as if the whole space which his form occupied suddenly convulsed of laughter, as if the very air was driven to action by something impossibly funny.

"Is not all this true?" Ao'soasa asked meekly.

Karkomak stopped, aware of his actions upon the young man sitting before him now. He looked at the youth suddenly aware of each aspect of him.

Hair dark, short and cropped, eyes a similar shade to the hair, body rippling of colours, shades of red and green; obviously he'd walked among the gwan fremoire.

But what was most clear to the javelin thrower was the smile.

He didn't have one.

The poor youth sitting here in that black spider-iron chair crouching over the table, shoulders slumped, possibly always slumped, seemed one who never engineered even once a smile.

It was not a matter of finding something funny. Anyone could do that. It was building the machinery to find something amusing when all the world said nothing was there.

The other exiles were perhaps likewise. Karkomak wasn't sure. And didn't care.

Only this lost child mattered to the javelin thrower now.

"It is true to a point, the way the sky is blue in the day. It is not always blue nor always the same colour of blue but one expects to see a sky a certain colour and must tailor out those details which do not conform to their vision.

"We are the i'ij, the children of Taiwaith and we do indeed act *sometimes* on the wishes of the l'Khal-Azriul. But we are the wind brother and the wind does not obey. Rather a wise being crafts sails and suddenly a sand ship has the speed and strength to travel. But it did not ask nor order the wind. It merely *understood* the wind."

"What is a sand ship?" Ao'soasa looked at him quizzically.

"It is a ship that sails on sand." Karkomak looked again more closely at the man. The name kind of indicated what it was. It was right *in* the name.

"We are waiting for a winged messenger to take us to Vologoesia," Ao'soasa said.

"You don't say."

Ao'soasa saw the grey-wind man look at him quizzically. He didn't know why.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Ao'soasa asked.

"Right to the point, good. Tell me, what do you think we are?"

"We are the servants . . ."

Karkomak put up his hand.

"What *are* we?"

"We are creatures of mist, of shadow."

"No." Karkomak then stared to his left a time watching some glass-bodied worms crawling in the dirt. "We are neither alive nor dead, neither flesh nor stone. Our bodies are the product of our minds only. We can become mist or stone or glass and we obey the laws of our own interests. And our own interests *only*. We are not subject to anyone but have within us the power to craft reality as we desire it."

As he spoke a unit of men approached all dressed just as he was. They came and the first stopped, saluted, and upon his head was a plume of purple. Karkomak saluted back.

"You see here my creations."

"Yours?"

"They are mine, my soldiers, my children born out of my own mind. I can conjure them, dissolve them, make them love me or hate me but they are nothing but the appendages of my will." He rose then, beckoning Ao'soasa to do likewise. The young man stared at one of the soldiers and the impossibly impassive face. It was like a statue breathing so inconsequentially as if suffocating painlessly in the middle of an empty summer day.

"These are my creations. I learned to make them millennia ago. You too can create armies or lovers or children. Your thoughts, your beliefs make it real."

"Why has not Gal-lu told me these things?"

"Why do you expect the wind to give answers to you?"

"Yet you are giving me answers," Ao'soasa replied.

With a brush of his hand all soldiers vanished into the shadows of oblivion.

"Quite true but I do this because I wish to and because it is unbecoming for one of our number to be so . . . heartless. She says you must wait for an arilus?"

Yes, that was the creature they were meant to wait for.

"Were she willing she could conjure such a being yet she is lingering. I'll not stay."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I cannot think why she'd have you wait except she wants you here so that we would meet. Yes, she wanted this communion so I would give you this gift of knowledge."

"Why didn't she simply tell me?"

"The capricious east wind little brother. At any rate, I have given you a new facet of the world's jewel, a new side to this mystery for you. I suspect I am to remain here, reveal all, give all, play my role, but I will not. And even if my role is to depart it makes no difference to me. I'll not stay in a city where one of my people can become a storm."

"Can you teach me nothing more?"

"Ah, a montage of increasing skills, the stutter of a camera showing the young protégé improving day by day. But this is not our way little brother. This is not *my* way. I will give you only two more pieces of wisdom she would not.

"Firstly, our home is not here, this is not our true country. We are merely refugees from Elsewhere, beings who never came from anywhere but simply always were.

"Secondly under no circumstances must you go near the blood. If you do it will melt you even if you were to become a stone. It is the singular weakness imposed on us by the l'Khal-Azriul, the one limitation we cannot escape from ourselves.

"Be careful in the presence of blood, do not let it touch you for a wound on the body of *them* can be fatal to the body of *us*."

Saying thus he turned to a river of fog and went on his way as Ao'soasa began to imagine the shape of things to come.

They were waiting there for seven days.

Finally, the beast came.

It was like a massive falcon forged of burnished bright iron and they were standing in a field beyond the city when it came. They lit upon its back, its beak the size of Mordant's frame and in a flash of invisible lightning, they were adrift.

During the time of waiting Ao'soasa asked Gal-lu nothing.

During the time of waiting Zelee asked nothing but her thoughts turned again and again to he who murdered one like her.

During the time of waiting Mordant said nothing but his thoughts revolved around the dying children he caused to become the dying, the sounds of their sufferings that would never stop. He wished he were anyone else, even but a machine striding islands of cement upon the surface of the sun.

Yet he never could just as Sthenelaos never could be any but Sthenelaos or Zelee any but Zelee.

As they drifted above seeing clouds from the skyward side Ao'soasa whispered something without understanding it, till now

There was no one in creation Ao'soasa wished to be but he.

The bright iron clouds turned azure then violet as night crept on with slender raven fingers and world cooled and their guide sighed her pleasures. And during those seven days Ao'soasa's contempt for her grew and grew and would not ever stop . . .

Chapter 8

The war of the year zero

Gal-lu explained the only way to reach the floating island was Vologoesia. She also explained why the sand whales could not be used was because the inhabitants of the city were at war with them and the sand whales at war with the sisters of the city.

The war had begun since the time of forever when the fire witches, those daughters of Vologoesia believed the sand whales could drain away their thoughts, siphon them and devour them like drops of spice or grains of sand.

The sand whales could do this but only occasionally which made it alright.

Of course, by now Ao'soasa understood what was being told to him.

And what did the l'Khal-Azriul think of all this? he asked.

It wasn't as if this were the only war in the world, she replied.

And so, they arrived.

Vologoesia was positioned as the final step for a simple reason. It was straddling the air itself.

Positioned upon several massive columns it was like a spider become stone, its face whittled away leaving only the rounded body behind.

So much like the outline of a sand whale, Marchen thought.

The arilus lit upon a flattened outcrop of stone, jutting into void. They departed and the golden waterfall took off, vanishing as if it'd never been.

Then they were greeted by the fire witches.

Pale women each the same appeared, all wearing robes of red. They were led forward and Marchen saw fire dripping from their fingertips like rain and all the time the voice of the girl, the boy, a thousand girls, a thousand boys kept dripping at the back of his consciousness, never ceasing like a summer storm.

The city rose in rounded layers rising upward and with some blunt ceremony they were higher and higher, passing labyrinthine corridors kept in shadow save for the daughters of flame they created and at the top just as they came an eclipse happened, but was no eclipse.

The Gamaliel'Isa was passing overhead.

In the shadow Marchen noticed glass-bodied worms crawling among the sands of the street and in a flash realized what they were. All life began as them that were not people like him.

The insects, the sand whales, even the winged messenger had begun thus.

He did not know why he knew this now. Perhaps the demon-king was speaking to him through the dead.

All he knew as came the final step, as Gal-lu changed to a pillar of mist in an open chamber of twelve columns, thin thread linking sky and ground and place between together was that Marchen was suddenly shaken even as he was carried violently upward.

For all creatures were the same rough beasts, a savage arithmetic, a terribly blunt mythology.

Those creatures in the dirt could become the enemies of the fire witches or their chosen companions and no one would know, neither they nor the denizens of the city till it was long too late and the beasts had grown, and the witches had known, and war was declared against them without any declaration being made.

As he was led away upward, he knew.

It was all too late . . .

Epilogue to Part I.

The Eagle
Alfred Lord Tennyson

He clasps the crag with crooked hands,
close to the sun in lonely lands,
ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
he watches from his mountain walls,
and like a thunderbolt he falls.

Part II.
Death

Anista Thalna's Story

Azrael
Robert Gilbert Welsh

The angels in high places who minister to us
reflect God's smile, their faces are luminous,
save one, whose face is hidden (the Prophet saith,)
the unwelcomed, the unbidden,
Azrael, angel of Death.

And yet that veiled face, I know,
is lit with pitying eyes,
like those faint stars, the first to glow
through cloudy winter skies.

That they may never tire, angels, by God's decree
bear wings of snow and fire, passion and purity;
save one, all unavailing (the Prophet saith,)
his wings are gray and trailing,
Azrael, angel of Death.
And yet the souls that Azrael brings
across the dark and cold,
look up beneath those folded wings
and find them lined with gold.

Chapter 9
When I have fears
that I may cease to be

There was at first the crumpling sound of oblivion, the way foil crumples into itself leaving only the sound behind, untarnished by the act.

Anista awoke, glancing about the black womb of the ship, conscious, alive. Death hadn't claimed her yet. The others were alive as well. Tsyalra was awake and the twins but Tsyalra seemed frozen and the twins were licking each other's wounds.

Kirman Kimmian was nowhere to be found. She heard his voice from outside, and she staggered out, watching the ship slowly dissolve away. The others would have to leave or nothing would be left of it and they'd be forced to abandon it anyway.

The world was sand except for the edge where Kirman stood.

Beyond the ship was an ocean of shadow and pooling up from this were bodies, becoming, being, reaching the point of been, becoming again.

Kirman turned sharp searching eyes to her, like green lamplight.

"I can hear them," he said.

She listened. She could hear them too.

This was Taiwaith, they said. They had arrived in the country of the i'ij.

The others crept from the ship melting like an ice palace in a summer land. Tsyalra stretched forth her/his hand and the shadows spoke. And purred. It was such an endearing sound and it was directed toward the hybrid. Tsyalra was unique after all. Rather than taking a single solitary mask Tsyalra had chosen two.

Originally there had been Tsyaln and Ira Reym, one an inhabitant of Aryl-Arylan, the second a soldier on R'xuhan Prime. Tsyalra had tailored the body to be a composite of both male and female, soldier and scholar, amorphous and solid.

For those of Aryl-Arylan could alter their shape, become an insect, flower, woman, or man, while those of R'xuhan Prime had only one shape at a time, infant, child, adult, corpse. And the grey-skinned races of R'xuhan bred many corpses in their time, warring ceaselessly till none were left alive.

Now Tsyala was both though he/she could not change as before, could not become anything. Its gender had been edited to become a man from the side of Aryl-Arylan and a woman from R'xuhan Prime.

Tsyala seemed a young woman or perhaps a young man no older than twenty with silvery shimmering skin shifting sometimes to bronze. And even then, one wasn't consciously aware of this just as one wouldn't notice an eye change colour from blue to a slightly lighter sea-blue.

And always were twin voices twined together and Tsyala saw with two perceptions as if one wore the halves of two masks fused, as if a demon and a saint were sharing space, uncertain who was who.

The twins came then.

Anaxibia and Ixexara had been the pilots, bred for such a role. They were uplifted dogs, fur eliminated, faces smoothed, claws lengthened to fingers. They even had hair upon their heads, a brown shade bleeding brilliance. If not for their eyes and tails they might have seemed ordinary women.

With all assembled Anista crept to the pool of shadows to ask what was to happen to them now.

One of the bodies crept from the shadow pool, gained a solid form and strode toward them. She wore the skin and form of a young woman with eight eyes circling about her brow.

Her name was Jael. She asked them where they came from.

"We come from Earth, seeking song of a woman I used to be."

"Ah, yes, I understand. The l'Khal-Azriul is seeking you."

"And who might he be?" Kirman asked.

"No one important . . . right now. You cannot stay in our lands of course. Look about you. There is no food, no sustenance. The sky is always that shade of darkness, the mountains in the distance always keep the thunder rolling. Even the sand whales could find no water in the underlands.

"You must go to Csairywyr. You might find yourself there."

"How will we get there?" Anaxibia asked, her voice suddenly sounding harsh to her own ears.

"I shall bring forth something to take you. But before I do I must ask when you find yourself what will you do?"

Anista pondered this and then said, "I don't know. She'll have to tell me."

The shadow-woman pondering this smiled and moments later the exiles were riding atop beasts whose legs were slender as twigs and whose rounded bodies seemed miniature hills, they who would evaporate into mist when their purpose was done as if they had never been.

Anista stared into the eyes of her beast, wide dark eyes with flecks of blue emerging and dissolving constantly, something Anista only slowly became aware of as they ran onward, their dung-dark bodies racing time.

Its eyes looked imploringly to her as if begging to take no further step for in the final step would come oblivion and it would be no more. But Anista didn't know how. She didn't have the words. All she could do was hold on and pray there was some purpose even in the end of things . . .

Chapter 10
Days were written
in amber then

As they raced Anista noticed the sunset. On a desert planet night was the time to live, day the time to die.

The beast kept imploring itself to stop, rounded body linked to her, her legs bound to the beast's rough skin.

As darkness crept into being Anista knew the hopelessness of their situation. Their ship was obliterated. No help was coming since even their pursuers had perished. This world possessed strange wonders and impossible things and for some reason, those things had given them free passage out of their lands.

As a machine she expected this but as a woman knew generosity was rare.

Perhaps they would not be greeted kindly where they were going.

Behind her, as she raced the others raced behind her . . .

She considered the logic of this thought and dismissed it. Needless redundancy, a circle without beginning or end. If pursued one need not say they were pursued. If running one need not say they were running.

Yet somehow crossing sands logic failed her for she had doubled her own thought to give comfort to her mind.

If A were A and B were B then life was life no matter where it was or where it bloomed.

Strange to imagine even the race had taken upon itself a new philosophy.

Suddenly she was aware of what she was, where she was.

She was a moment in time suspended between two other moments in time.

There was Anista machine-woman, wearer of persona, immortal undying god who had crushed herself down to play the game of her creators following this trail because after eternity

there was nothing left to do or prove except the chance to do something else.

But there was the other Anista, she who was coming, she shaped by the desert and its creatures, she confronted by whatever perverse beauty created this world and that other Anista would have no way of going back or choosing another way, no way of being another being. Other Anista was being carried to the destruction of whatever she was here and now having no way to prevent it.

But what was worse she desired it that way.

For her time as a machine was a life written in amber, an unchanging rune reiterating forever, capable of taking any form and incapable of being any other thing besides itself.

If one's days were preserved under glass anything would change you, the most profound terror or the most profound beauty.

Behind her, the others raced. The others raced behind her.

Gaining speed her beast took a wide leap ahead, a new confident stride as if in symbiosis with her desired oblivion.

By the rising sun, this Anista would cease.

There would only be some creation made aware of some new aspect of the world they were wandering in.

And what was more she welcomed it.

Chapter 11

Silver skinning blistering

Csairywyr was nestled beside the still mountain of a long extinct volcano, residing as a pool of stone in an ocean of sand arranged as a grid, along the outer edge each street identical to the other, each single-storey house identical where identical souls lived so any home could be *the* home they knew.

Then as one moved closer to the city's heart homes grew higher, rising slightly upward in imitation of the shadow of the mountain they lived beneath till at the very centre seemed a spire from which the entire world below could be viewed as if one were some god capable of watching all beneath with an infinite eye.

As they approached their mounts dissolved away and Anista felt a twang of pity at their passing, almost.

Then they stood amid a throng of people moving forward and back, all wearing strange masks, all speaking strange tongues.

Anista didn't know what any of them were saying.

It occurred to her the i'ij had known how to speak because they communicated by thought alone but here was no sure guide.

The masks changed often, sometimes the shapes of animals or birds or insects. Or more. Or less. She wasn't always sure.

Tsyalra wandered among masked beings who wore long robes of tanned brown, lined with gold. The group turned to look at Tsyalra and one approached. Taking off her mask revealed a pale face and sea-green eyes staring intently at the stranger.

Then handing the mask to Tsyalra Tsyalra put it on and spasmed as if in agony.

The others approached but as they did the group, twelve in all held them, each removing masks to reveal the same pale face, and same pale sea-green eyes as masks were affixed to each of them.

And in agony, they drowned.

It was as if being born struggling for breath each breath an agony of fire in the lungs and nothing to guide you nothing at all except the pain and feeling of the hot sun and the smell of copper burnishing into glass living glass and then the smell of the ocean and islands in the far distance along the farther shore and you are there and you are here and you are . . .

She passed out from the pain.

Awakening to consciousness Anista found herself in a small room upon a bed, curtains drawn to her left letting only silvers of light creep in. The bed was wide and beside her lay one of the same women she'd seen before.

She was naked, staring intently at Anista, the mask in her hand, and at the sight of it Anista instinctively tried to rise but couldn't. Glancing down she wasn't bound yet couldn't move.

"Don't be afraid," the woman said, "the anistrali simply connected into you a time."

"Anistrali?" she asked weekly then realized she understood the woman.

"Yes. These are the ways we differentiate ourselves here, ways we prove we are not simply the crowd. Here, look."

The woman handed the mask to Anista whose arms were suddenly freed to move again.

She expected the mask to be metallic but it was cloth. It bent and folded in her grasp. It was the mask of a small golden bird with small rivulets of scarlet etched down the face, barely perceptible.

Anista handed the mask back to her inquisitor.

"It's beautiful," Anista said weakly.

"Yes. Each mask is meant to convey a different emotion. I have six, some have twelve. One has over twenty though we think she is being vain. But they do not simply show what we feel. They prove to us who we are."

She rose, naked limbs gracefully moving as if music were playing, she swaying to a song Anista could not yet discern.

With a deft move, she drew back the curtains revealing they were on the second floor of a home. Now Anista's legs were freed and she too came toward the window, only now realizing she was naked too.

Beyond were other homes and other windows and other women, some of whom were naked. In one she saw a man who was not flesh, but machine.

So, they possessed a machine culture here as well . . .

"No."

Anista turned to see the woman shaking her head.

"We do not have the same sort of machines as you were. They are called symlorians. Our city mass-produces them. They can be tailored to any desire, man, woman, child, animal, *other*. They are as intelligent as we are but not as intelligent as you were."

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"It was something I might have thought of."

"And how do you know about me?"

"The anistrali is where our souls reside Anista. We are born in chambers below the ground, born from something alive but unthinking. When we are born, we are blank slates having no emotion, will, nor desire.

"In those first moments, we are placed in a chamber among the hundreds of anistrali. We then instinctively move to one, pick up it there among rows of faces, and wear it.

"When we do this, we become what we adorn, given the sum total of the life that occupied that mask before and before then, and before then. I gave you a life Anista, mine."

"Why?"

"For the same reason that Tsyalra and Kirman and the twins were given lives. We were expecting you . . . my daughter."

The woman stared into Anista's eyes, brown hues flecked with hazel, looked to the curve of her mouth as if savouring a fine meal, gazed down to her breasts, her legs, then returned to her face.

Hungrily.

“I never thought I’d see my face again. Hello Anista Thalna. My name is Anista Thalna.”

Then the room spun silver and the floor rose to meet her as she fell.

Chapter 12

Giants' country

Kirman was staring at the woman who was him. He was naked sitting in a chair, uniform crumpled to the corner behind him. Those women of the city had waited at that exact spot for the few stragglers from an immortal race and immortal world and now Kirman was sitting here claiming to be him, staring him down with odd compassion, strange sympathy. Or condescension.

"What would you wish to know?" she asked finally.

He sat, his legs curled about him trying to think, the anistrali's influence still eating at his mind. Finally, he decided.

I am Kirman Kimmian, a child of the Earth, a son of the machines, but I was a child of Zyalhre first.

"What happened to Zyalhre?" he finally asked.

"The last trace of her was somewhere near B'tan. I have seen her twice but only twice in all the lives I've been here."

"Are there others of us?"

"Oh, so many. We occupy twenty cities, some look like this, some have more eyes, some have less, some are sand-weavers, some metal-weavers . . . ah, you don't know what that means."

"They weave metal the way we used to weave flesh," he said casually. She smiled at his understanding. "Well, it seemed a common enough explanation," he went on, "since we were once called flesh-weavers back in our day."

"True enough. As for Zyalhre, I saw her twice. Both times she cursed at me."

"I had hoped . . ."

"Hoped she would be kind? That she would understand?"

"Yes," he said with a still, small voice.

"She is the only one of her kind now. All life here is something else but she is unique. She and the l'Khal-Azriul."

"What is that?"

"The devil, or a demon, or a dark lord, or a god. Name shifts meaning closer you are to him. To it. Some consider the

l'Khal-Azriul to be the world's maker, others its tempter. I was told in Xoriesaria they make statues depicting him as a lion-headed serpent, a three-headed dog, or a shadow given shape of stone. But none know for sure. All simply pretend."

"What do you believe?"

"What I have not seen I do not know. As is the nature of the tlesac."

He smiled. That was the name of his people. Back on Earth he had been the only one to adopt this persona. Most choose human or xenixaran. He was unique.

"Who told you of our arrival?"

"The i'ij sent a messenger before you arrived. When I saw the beasts, I knew they had been imagined to drag their heels. I suspect perhaps they even had a desire not to fade away . . ."

"Are the i'ij always so cruel?"

"What is cruel? For a time, the mounts you used existed, then, for a time they were gone. If it was cruel for them to die, was it equally cruel to create them? Here on Phyre such lessons are learned perhaps too well."

"Phyre?"

"It has two names. Phyre and Dajjal. The gwan fremoire call it both at once. Most choose one or the other."

"What do you call it?"

"I call it my home. As will you in time."

"What if we desire to leave?"

The twins made communion with two women who once owned senses finer than they had now. For an entire afternoon from the seasons after midnight to just before dawn, (night being perceived as day, so "afternoon" came to mean before light not before dark,) the twins described the way a perfume tasted or how the sky crumpled into small pools where people passed like ghostly echoes reliving long ago conversations or experiences, flawlessly.

The women closed their eyes during all this, just listening

and remembering. They could recall the scent of skin along the air but no longer experience it. For an afternoon the living lived vicariously through the dead.

And then there was Tsyalra.

Two women were staring at their progeny. The composite was sitting in a chair explaining hundreds of millions of years, detailing both of her/his homeworlds and Earth and several other planets entirely.

And they marvelled at the flavour of its speech which reflected their own and the colour of its eyes which were the compilation of both of theirs, then all settled to a bland meal.

And Tsyalra explained so perfectly how wonderful it would all be now that they were together.

In the day the pair slept leaving Tsyalra to watch the sun slowly roar across the sky. All others were peacefully asleep as well. Only the composite remained with two sets of memories, two personalities flawlessly balanced together.

And here an entire world to explore, learn of, and develop.

In her hands was a mask, in his hands a mask, and a smile crossed the lips of the stranger in their midst.

It would be so easy Tsyalra realized to blend both together, wear two masks or three or more since the fabric could be effortlessly tailored thus, to put three minds or six inside a single body all at one time.

The various masks all belonged to a single soul, all copies of one life seen from different angles the way a calm man can become angry or a lustful woman calmly refuse an offer she wishes to decline.

It would be so easy to put them all together, to make the entire world like them and so easy to murder parents in their beds then steal away to the chambers where the masks are held and begin the sacred work.

But Tsyalra thought better of this. For the masks were made somewhere, of course, repaired somewhere of course.

Tsyalra would simply go there and do the thing he/she wished and afterward slaughter the pair of them and watch them flow together and become a brave new thing exactly like himself, herself. And finally, Tsyalra wouldn't be alone anymore.

So, the stranger would simply wait.

There was all the time in the world in the giants' country where the sun dragged out its scream against the sky and in the distance great mountains loomed and roared.

In time another giant would be added to their ranks, Tsyalra thought to himself, herself, itself. Itself of course.

Chapter 13

Seeds from a malachite planet

Once there was a planet known as Spindrifit. It possessed malachite continents and rivers of black water which sometimes took on the shape of pitch. No life existed there and it held no strategic value nor was important in any obvious way.

Yet Spindrifit was the key to the security of countless civilizations over eons of time.

Often two races would meet on Spindrifit at once.

Sometimes three.

There would be air and there would almost be water. The gravity would conform to what was needed for these races so they would begin their negotiations. Their communions.

And since the world was worthless there was nothing to fight about.

Tsaljiria and Tsualjiria. Khyrilljo and Khyrilijira. Zhulazazi and Zhualzazi had all once warred with each other for a century merely over the differences of their name and found an end to their conflict on a planet so far from home that only the thought of home sustained.

Spindrifit became the place of ending things, wars usually, violence often. Since there were no plants or animals there was no way to officiate these treaties.

So instead, small pieces of the planet were taken away, seeds of peace spread across infinity.

Some argued it was for this reason Spindrifit ceased to be since all the portions of itself had long since been taken away.

Others argued the reason Spindrifit was not found was because it was not needed anymore.

Wars ceased anyway.

Csairywyr was the centre of production for the symlorian race.

Living Anista, first Anista, no, First Anista explained how this process worked to her daughter false Anista, no, New Anista.

"When we first emerged, the buildings were already in existence, the whole planet was seemingly inhabited before we came.

"We occupy the niches of those who came before, looking like the first beings who dwelled here."

"Could you *be* the first race without knowing it?"

"A possibility, but unlikely. I remember my last day as a woman and my first day. The anistrali show us an unbroken line from our death to our nights on Phyre. So, we became the new occupants of an empty planet. But we remembered being before.

"I remembered my face which you're wearing now.

"And many of those who created you are here with us now.

"You see we also remembered desire. I remember the feel of my husband's hand along my back, the way he caressed my thigh, but even if I find him it's possible that he's forgotten me, his soul emptied of our time together. So, we built them instead."

They were walking along the streets as she spoke, her mask folded neatly into her robes, New Anista beside her listening as First Anista expounded on the nature of their cowardly old world.

"The symlorians are like the anistrali, memories written back into us to give us a proper shape of things which were. We construct them, fill their minds with what we have tailored them to be then choose one for a time or a lifetime."

"And what do you do with them?" New Anista asked almost innocently.

"Anything we desire, and more. They are as intelligent as we are, composed of personalities, imaginations, and dreams. We simply make them as we liken them, as we want them . . . but over time a terrible truth has come to us."

"And what is that?"

“When you are given all you desire, your desires shape you.”

Along the streets were many iterations of the woman New Anista walked beside. Many walked with men, women, and children none of whom wore masks, and all of whom moved with the same artificial grace she recognized in her own old body.

They were used to give pleasure to the living though nothing of what they desired was life itself.

Seen in the eyes of each machine New Anista noticed something. These were not the downcast eyes of a thing. They each had their agency, their purpose.

Perhaps knowing how all their purposes would end.

“How many have you created?” she asked.

“No more than fifty million are ever made. At any time on Phyre there are no more than four billion sentient beings and no more. The entire planet never supports more than this. The symlorians could be given to each person but instead, they are a form of status and a form of envy.”

“There are many here.”

“We build them. We have a claim over what we desire most. But our desires can undo us daughter. Our desires can destroy us.”

They reached their destination.

It was a small factory, a point New Anista realized because First Anista passed many of the same three-storey buildings and called one of them a factory as they passed.

Logically therefore they were all factories as well, their only difference being what they produced.

Within both Anistas watched as the body of a young girl was put together, her hair oddly silver, her eyes blue.

“She will be for sex?” one Anista asked the other.

“Perhaps. You do realize she is not a child. Just as each of us has our personalities stored so do they. When they break down, they are then recalled and restructured. But each time something is preserved, just like us.

"That girl as is old as you were a million years after I died."

At the thought of First Anista's death, her counterpart stopped.

"Do you remember it?" the daughter asked her mother.

"Do you remember dying?"

"Yes. And death. I remember watching you coming toward me in that room, remember singing, you taking my hand in yours, then darkness or something worse. I suspect that was death.

"Then arriving here, naked slate groping in a maze till this face was put on me and I became me again. Yes, I remember dying and death my daughter. Every day and every night."

The two stood silently while watching women slowly assemble the body of a daughter upon an empty slab. The room was oddly cold as if moisture were growing upon the walls. The joints of the girl snapped into place, calves to thighs and arms to shoulders, each time making an oddly excruciating sound. When finished there was a black flash of fire and eyes gained awareness then she was led away by one of her creators into another room.

"What is happening?"

"She is being tested out, in every way."

"Who would find her an object of desire?"

"We haven't our bodies anymore my daughter. These skins we wear are not us. I had hair once, had fingernails, had red blood and my eyes had pupils. Now I have none of these things. When you wore my anistrali I saw all you had done and become. I saw you walk across the surface of the sun, my daughter, saw you sail oceans of oil wearing an invulnerable body. You had the sum total of all our knowledge. Yet you came here. Why?"

"I have to know what you know. What was the answer, what was the missing gear that allowed you to be you and not me? I had a body that would not die and yet the moment I heard your signal I knew if I came here the key would be revealed."

"And would you kill if killing meant finding that key,

retaking that road?"

Without hesitation, she said yes.

"So too we would do anything to forget what we are now.

Yet the objects of desire we create can tailor us, they edit us my daughter so that each generation longs for greater depravities, greater cruelties. Yet the wheel never changes. The machines move on forever with their lives and we are infinitely alone."

After a time one woman or the other mentioned being hungry so both departed together as if both shared the same sentiment.

Or fate.

Chapter 14
Such fear is etched
on all else

The twins spent a day with their legacies, Kirman a day with his conscience and Tsyala a day plotting murder for her/his progenitors while Anista toyed with the thought of her name.

She was New Anista now. On the walk home First Anista mentioned she considered herself first iteration of who Anista was now while New Anista was simply the newest part of whatever the woman had once been. So, she was New Anista now. But she didn't feel particularly new.

Sitting in First Anista's room glancing at the mirror hanging on the far wall she looked the same. Even knowing what she knew changed not a single thing.

Of course there wasn't just Phyre, there was Watyr too.

The people of Csairywyr could see those of Watyr by using the ascaliel, small parasites in the blood. This allowed them to notice what their counterparts were doing just as their counterparts saw them.

There was a word First Anista used regarding this.

Cocordran.

According to First Anista there was division at creation, a splitting of beings. One emerged here on Phyre yet at any time one could watch a second self on Watyr and each assumed the other held their worst traits, that whatever was evil or wild or insane arrived where they were not.

It was not clear if it were true or merely some torture designed as irony. For they could not read each other's minds nor know if who they were spying on were even really themselves.

It was just assumption, delusion, an infinite belief to explain why some dwelled on a desert without end and others an ocean without thirst. Surely some were blessed, some were cursed. Surely?

If true the only solution was to meet the woman on Watyr.

So, they would have to go to the other side of alien waters and the only way to do this would be to see the l'Khal-Azriul, assuming he desired to be seen.

Plans had been made on the path to take. First Anista and Kirman's counterpart were coming. The twins' progenitors declined knowing the longer they stayed sooner they would envy the senses of their adopted offspring. Tsyala's origins likewise declined.

During some day they struggled in their sleep, even in separate beds in separate rooms and when both awakened awakened to some unnamed fear they could not explain.

Tsyala seemed disappointed but even as the composite drew the pair for a final embrace, they struggled against this and tried to turn away without being able to explain why.

But these events were days from now when they would depart by train to Aiolis. The train itself was a living thing of flesh, each chamber a lung.

Now though Anista was simply considering her name.

There were so many variations to it, small anagrams all deriving from six letters, all arriving at the same position in time. It was as if her name was some new continent and she the final/first to explore it.

Then the day to come and the day to come leading to their departure so perfectly arranged she could see herself moving along the platform, waving to herself goodbye.

She imagined this perfect other Anista moving through the frozen river of time who not only planned meticulously but had taken each perfect step, some weighed down by her choice, other steps tailored by whatever invisible gods defined her world.

Was this what it meant to be human, each second changing her or being changed, carrying her alone without delay?

In time they might visit the country of the unseen king

If Anista imagined it then it might be so.

But which Anista she did not know.

Chapter 15

As if all the anger had
been taken out of it . . .

They booked passage going to Aiolis and from there B'tan.

As they departed First Anista made prayer. Sitting in that chamber together, the twins before them, Kirman and Kirman off to another room and only grey walls and chairs an audience First Anista made prayer.

It was surprising to imagine there was some faith here but the prayer was not to any deity. It was to the culsuan and the culsulan, to those Anista imagined had been the first to occupy the city. It was their names. After so many millennia words had worn so it was unclear if they were one name or another so First Anista honoured them by saying both. Just in case.

The prayer was simply a means of focusing her she explained, to put oneself in the thoughts of something greater by placing one's fate in their power even if they were now only wind or sand.

It was odd to imagine herself praying for the machine never did nor had reason to before. And it was not as if there was anything to fear. Even if they died, they would simply still end up here. Yet both knelt their heads and began their prayers uncertain if any heard or if any answer was ever coming.

"We shape ourselves and our desires shape us."

The train rode upon tracks of a breathing twined thread which the train roared upon.

The twins were conversing among themselves, noticing the sweet air which the compartment created while New Anista was trying to understand.

"In that first life it seemed so simple to rebuild and try again. We had bodies incapable of disease or age so it seemed so simple. We were in heaven even as we thirsted.

"I helped build the first machines, I tailored them, modelled them off you. But I made differences, limiting them to make certain they felt something we failed to give you.

"Pleasure.

"They can experience the physical sensations of what we used to be. Can you imagine that? I suppose you can now. And yet each generation has been tailored with new desires added to them. Age is no longer a concern, nor gender, nor race nor appearance. But over time I've come to realize that though we made them they are making us, changing our desires.

"The objects we wish for most change us."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You came because of a song, yes? My song?"

"Your signal, yes. We heard it and knowing it came from you realized I could learn from you what it is to be you."

"Except, my daughter, I made no such signal. How could I? Our technology is not that advanced. You still don't understand, do you? It was not any living being who relayed the message, but them. I discovered when you arrived who sent the song.

"The symlorians copied my voice, they knew it perfectly so used this to bring you here."

Taken aback New Anista could only stare blankly a few moments outside watching brilliant reeds grow and retreat into the sands rhythmically, like a heartbeat.

"Why would they do this?" she asked finally.

"To learn about you, to understand what they lack that you possess. They knew you were out there so they drew you to them."

"Then why aren't they en route with us, unless you are . . ."

"I am not a machine my daughter, no. I am of flesh and blood. But the masks I wear act as a repository of knowledge and as a transmitter. As we are travelling, they are watching, devouring every gesture you make, every word you say, everything you do. And what is more, as they learn of you they

will alter themselves, add to themselves all you used to be. That is why we are seeking to find the l'Khal-Azriul for you to leave, to go to the oceans and from there perhaps find your way home. For the longer you stay the more they will learn and the more they will learn the more influence they will have over us."

"Then we should not have come."

"No, you should have. We are not innocent children to be terrified of change. And I am proud to know I was important enough for you to claim. Can you not understand, my daughter? Each of the cities here and each dominion despite our unending lives is still utterly convinced it all must end.

"Our desires do not make us wish to live forever nor make us wish an end of things. Our desires simply shape those same feelings in new ways. Each one of us, myself included, knows a Ragnarok is coming, we feel it in our bones no matter how long we live. We know all things must end. You may be the instrument of that end, or not.

"But to worry or say you should not have come is madness. An end must come when it comes."

"You were a poet," New Anista said quietly.

"I was, as you are. I see Kirman and Kirman are still talking quietly, and the twins . . . why dogs anyway?"

"I have no idea. Perhaps the same reason I chose you."

"Why?"

"I desired to," she said simply.

Chapter 16

And just as quickly gone

Kirman sat before the woman and continued to stare. Light skin and a single shade of blue or black her eye. He regarded her as a painter might his portrait if done by a different hand, noticing each subtle shade different to how he'd intended.

The train roiled on with the hills of Aiolis soon coming.

He had seen her before but was now trying to figure out the reasoning behind her form. With flesh-mechanics there was always purpose behind design. Since First Kirman always lived she lacked perspective to study her shape properly even as other iterations of herself walked about.

"The face is proportional to an almost perfect degree. Eyes are missing pupils. Tell me, can still see near and far?"

"Yes."

"Hmm, doesn't seem possible."

"I know. It has something to do with how our bodies work. They are flesh but . . . not flesh."

"Born from a corpse flower."

"Yes."

He tilted her head forward noticing the smooth scalp. Having exhausted all other topics this interrogation was the only thing left for them now.

"No marks of any kind. If you are cut how long does it take to heal?"

"We're never cut."

As he examined her Kirman noticed Tsyala gazing out the window. The entire chamber was composed of several broad seats for many to sit upon, Anista and Anista taking the one on his right, the twins facing them, First Kirman before him, Tsyala to his left.

Tsyala had an odd dreamy look on her/his face.

"Tsyala."

Turning the composite shot back to awareness.

"Yes?"

"Tell me when your persona was on Aryl-Arylan you could change shape, yes?"

"Yes."

"Now, bear with me a moment, was there any shape you couldn't turn into? Is there anything you couldn't become in time?"

Tsyalra paused as if in deep thought.

"I suppose I couldn't compress my shape or expand it beyond a certain point. Why?"

"Your body was capable of near infinite change and your people evolved naturally. Well, if you'll forgive me but since we are here and since we are before our progenitors I thought we would encounter ordinary natural beings. But this body is not remotely natural."

"I think we've gathered that," Tsyalra said icily.

"You miss my point. May I?"

First Kirman nodded and Kirman took her right arm in his hand, extending it out for all to view.

"The arm is exactly proportion to Anista's arm, without deviation. The skin is durable enough to not be harmed by cuts or bruises and is utterly flawless. I can see no marks, no scars, nothing. Your fingers lack fingernails which should mean the tips will be damaged but skin's so flawless the lack means nothing."

"So?" First Kirman asked.

"If we were building physical forms back on our homeworld how would we do it?"

"We'd start with a template," she turned the words over slowly as if remembering some final pleasure, "then begin the process of differentiation, making certain to inlay several mistake-genes."

"Why would we do that?"

"If a genetic pattern was rendered flawless the innovation potential would cease to be. Whatever organism made would already be at its evolutionary end."

"Precisely."

As they talked Kirman seemed again a doctor as if the role had finally come back to him. The body of his progenitor had awakened his old self.

"No flesh-writer from our world would ever create multiple copies of a single organism with no deviation. It isn't done. But you've said there are many species here physically identical, yes."

"At least twenty."

"At least twenty. So, there is variation in the template but it's at the beginning stage. And this body of yours is incredible. Not just skin. Yours are the exact proportions of a twenty-five-year-old if I assume her rate of age is comparable to a woman from Earth."

"I would imagine so."

"Don't you see!" Kirman almost shouted loud enough for the others to turn to him. He quieted a bit then said to hell with it in his mind and continued. "My apologies, but isn't it obvious?"

"If you told me I'd say it's obvious."

"This whole planet could have been originally a colony for a collection of multiple last species, last members of dying worlds. Consider it, the cities were built before you arrived, yes? And the technology you made required preexisting tools, yes? What if there was a ship like our own and it came here with one individual from each world? They come and the goal is to do as we would do, differentiate. The fungus was their means of reproduction. So, they begin but something goes wrong, maybe they die, or maybe they cloned themselves first to create a workforce with plans for differentiation later. And then each one dies but the machinery is in place so the fungus does what it was meant to do and begins building bodies."

"How do you explain me remembering my life, a life preserved in a mask?"

"Maybe it was how they were to do it, maybe they took all the thoughts of the living to create a new world here. Like I said if

they had died then that would explain it, explain why the fungus only produces one type of body per environment.

"It's waiting for new orders."

"An excellent theory," Tsyala said, "I would even call it a brilliant theory. Just three slight problems I see."

"Oh, what are they?"

"Problem the first, wouldn't these dead individuals still be here, I mean assuming the masks could preserve the life of an entire being?"

"I hadn't considered that."

"What is the second problem?" First Kirman asked.

"There's another planet. There's Watyr and living beings upon it as well. Some think you were divided with half your 'souls' there. The thing is I can't imagine any intelligent species *trying* to build a colony on a desert planet. No race in the entire universe with infinite planets to choose from would willingly come here."

"What's the third problem?" Kirman asked.

"How do you explain this unseen king?"

"Maybe a malfunctioning machine whose programming was corrupted over the span of forever."

"Maybe Kirman, maybe. But if he is like us, would he ever be so cruel as to call himself the l'Khal-Azriul? I don't know about you but I can't imagine any machine ever willingly putting on the skin of the devil."

With that, the whole company was silent till the twins caught a scent of water and they pulled to the edges of Aiolis.

Chapter 17
Trees from a
malachite planet

Aiolis was not a city. It possessed buildings and there were people but was unlike any metropolis Anista could imagine.

The people here were mandrake-shaped women wandering the ground, buildings the fossilized remains of great ammonite shells.

The exiles moved among them. This was the waystation to B'tan and from B'tan to the l'Khal-Azriul.

As they walked vine women moved among them, groping for something.

"What do they want?" New Anista asked.

"They want to see you. This is one of the richest veins of the i'scairaja on Phyre. It is like the taproot of a tree pooled here. Since it knows you were not made from it it wants to see you."

"Should we let it?"

"You don't have a choice," First Anista said quietly.

One of the green women came forward, her faceless head twisting to see into Anista's own as she felt fingers itch into her arm. It was similar to the experience with the mask but not as painful. There was a mosaic-menagerie of colours and images. She could see mountains and women with lamprey mouths and a city of malachite of mutely screaming forms. She saw Csairywyr behind her and realized it could see her.

Would it find something wanting? It didn't say, but she felt as she had when riding with the creature toward Csairywyr, a knowledge she would end. Its thread was taken up again and lost when she found herself staring at her in bed.

She was the end written into her as the corpse flower of the underlands wrote it. She felt herself smile as if for the first time, knowing she was finally what she pretended to be.

A creature about to end.

It released her but first gave her an image. She was standing before a stage, her role done, standing before a crowd in the dark, and knew once she exited the stage she would cease to exist. Out in the black, she would be gone.

She heard applause and tried to see who applauded her. In the dark, she saw the faces of those women who were her own.

"We are alone in an audience of self, awaiting validation from someone else, little knowing the clapping is our own."

She awakened released, uncertain if what she heard was from the woman of green or herself.

Then deciding it didn't matter went on her way.

Behind them, the twins were released and New Anista swore she heard the vine women laughing as if aware of a joke she'd never heard . . .

Even Tsyralra was examined.

Tsyralra had expected some problems if they knew the composite's intentions. Instead after the examination he/she was released and left to walk in the shadows of ancient giant shells passed pale moon-coloured hills home to bloodless things.

But before it let Tsyralra go the composite heard all the words of everyone upon the shores of Phyre as if warning against the plan. Dismissing this Tsyralra walked on.

Had they been able the vine women would have shaken their heads in shame . . .

Kirman too held communion with them. His theory was laid out and they allowed him to imagine all Phyre as he had described, vine women merely iterations of one woman, the entire world but a failed colony.

Yet as he watched there loomed the lingering gap of how had all supposedly died.

"How do you explain this?" something asked in his mind.

"Perhaps the l'Khal-Azriul who exterminated your kind."

They did not answer as if it had never occurred to them before. He was freed and left to go wander with the others as the vine women as one woman stood staring into space with invisible eyes . . .

Reaching the platform they prepared for their destination.
The heart of the world.

Chapter 18
No one needs warning
not to step to the moors

The short train ride they spent mostly in silence.
Anaxibia and Ixexara talked quietly among themselves.

From their perspective, the entire ordeal was riddled with a certain joy. Senses were alive in an ocean of scent, each body relaying subtle hints of *something* larger peering from the dark below their sensory awareness.

"I wonder why she is so sad?" Anaxibia asked Ixexara.

"Who?"

"The Anista born here."

Where Kirman saw colour Ixexara saw the scent-pool of skin shifting through the air creating small echoes where people sat or stood like a trail of forms descending backward across movement, space, and time.

First Anista sat with their Anista on the train. Her mask was in her hand, which she hadn't used in ages. They were the only occupants of the carriage. First Anista shifted uncomfortably in the grey seat, her mouth turned slightly but what they saw was not her face but her body. Her sweat glistened invisibly and along it were defects of stress, the subtle deformities of grief.

Their own origins were saddened to be in bodies that no longer behaved as they desired but she was different. She was the last living human and had finally found out she was not forgotten.

Dogs, even engineered by humans to be more like humans know instinctively the importance of not being forgotten. To them, time is memory itself since finding and losing those you know is always met with the same rough pleasure.

In glancing at her Anaxibia was right. First Anista was very sad but she wasn't sure why.

"If I were like her I would say I am sad because I know our Anista went further than she ever did."

"How so?"

"Our Anista lived for millions of years as a single being, capable of anything. This Anista lived and died and lived again. They do not age but their bodies fail them anyway. Imagine how it must seem to her to know her creation went further than she."

"Perhaps you are right."

"Perhaps? Why do you think she is sad?"

"She is sad because she will have to say goodbye."

"To who?"

"Who do you think? To herself of course."

At this the pair were silent as the train railed on.

New Anista sat staring out the window. In those visions she had seen Marchen and Sthenelaos and Ao'soasa and Zelee then watched them disappear atop some towered city.

And she had seen others.

At first, it wasn't clear who until she heard the laugh. It began there and reiterated here. It was Galon's laugh.

So at least he had survived and with him a few others.

But a few others only.

"Tell me, are all the dead always here?"

"Eventually. Like I said only four billion can ever exist on Phyre at any given time."

"So Akharrarru and Khyrilijo and Kharun would be here somewhere."

"I suppose."

"And Ayrmulios and Cermulios, they as well?"

"Eventually."

"Aboard ship one of us had taken on the persona of Uolirjira. Did you ever hear of her? A moth-winged goddess worshipped by the xenixarans. Not a real goddess, mind, just the idea of one. She was someone I knew for over a million years and now she's gone."

"Why didn't you mention any of them before?"

She turned to her mother then.

"If I mentioned it that made it real. If I said they were gone that would mean they were really gone. Can an idea be given life? Those people I mentioned took their personas from stories. Do you know the story of Akharrarru?"

First Anista shook her head.

"It was a novel written twelve thousand years before you died and the author put in the book a character named Balanqijal. Only there was a mistake in the first edition and it was written as Balangijal, with a g rather than a q.

"So, the novel was about this demon king and Balanqijal was this hero moving from life to life specifically designed to kill the demon king. But with the mistake made it was Balangijal, an entirely different person only mentioned in the title of the chapter he appeared in and nowhere else. Well, the author made a second book involving knights and dragons and oceans and islands and he purposely made the title Balanqijal but created an entirely new character named Balangijal. And that was why the book was given a sequel."

"Who is Akharrarru, the demon or the hero?"

"Neither. Akharrarru was the name of the demon king's cat who watched and observed and had no stake in the outcome at all. Tell me, is he out there now? Will I ever find him?"

"I don't know. If they were alive, they would come here."

"But they were . . .," she stopped herself as if realizing a truth, "*they were* alive, they were *alive*."

"Then perhaps yes they are here."

"Are there dogs here? Cats, horses, mice, insects?"

"We think so, yes. All animals and plants seem to be born from those glass-bodied worms."

"Do you think ideas are born the same way?"

"I think," First Anista said, staring over the shoulder of her daughter out into the sands beyond, "that if your friends were alive, they are out there now somewhere. We need only find them."

"And if I die, will I become like you?"

"No," First Anista said simply, "you will just become like you. No two people see the world through the same eyes. Worse." She almost smiled then. "No one person sees the world through the same eyes given enough time. How old are you?"

"I am as old as you ever were."

"And I am still that old woman lying upon a slab. Don't even remember my face when I was young, *your face* you're wearing now. No, when you die here you will not be me, you will just become you, with all that that entails."

Glancing at First Anista and First Kirman who seemed the same New Anista wasn't sure if that was true. But if she believed it perhaps it would be true in time . . .

They arrived at B'tan. This was where arularit were created and it was this First Anista believed would allow them to contact the I'Khal-Azriul.

The peoples of Phyre lacked any of the usual sources of information scattering. There was no technology like on Earth or Xenixara to allow people to remain in contact with each other.

The masks could relay signals but only symlorians could access that information from a distance. If they had this ability, it would be like pouring one's entire life into the minds of all else, superimposing their self and will across the world.

Instead, they used arularit.

It was a small ring with a scarlet spherical jewel on it. To use it one needed to wear it. This would allow contact with several other bearers including, it was hoped, the I'Khal-Azriul. Though the vine women might have been useful for this they had no way to access the floating continent upon which the unseen king reclined.

Moreover, even if the I'Khal-Azriul had attuned himself to them there was no reason to suppose he was interested.

However, if the god of the world were spoken to . . .

The people of B'tan were all a shade of azure with a single solid blue eye in their forehead and a thin slip of a mouth. They

seemed boneless there in the city carved of a single azure stone and since they had access to all the knowledge of the world the exiles were expected here as well.

It was as if their expectations of their lives preceded them.

The people of B'tan greeted them and they were led in mute procession to a tower and atop it sat a single room. It was like the interior of the jewel and it was here their guide explained they could deliver their signal to the I'Khal-Azriul.

"What should we say?" Kiram asked.

"Perhaps a lullaby," Anaxibia said without the slightest twinge of irony.

New Anista thought she would rather scour the desert for the lost. First Anista gripped her right arm softly as if aware of her plan.

"No daughter. Focus upon the task at hand. There is time later to be a human being. For now, do the flawless thing. Seek him out."

And all the time Tsyralra was marvelling at this device . . .

For nearby was the city of Anistrali where the masks were made and the signal's strength enough to clothe all Phyre.

Since the exiles were known to be children of a machine culture like the symlorians none feared what they might do except perhaps those vine women who turned away in shame.

All one needed to do to use the room was pour one's energy into a single thought and the stronger the thought the stronger the energy would be. So, if *two* minds were working tandem how much stronger would *that* be?

As New Anista was torn between humanity and her desires Tsyralra steeled herself/himself for battle, prepared to change the world . . .

Chapter 19

Heaven in an hourglass

Clutched in his/her hand was a ring, a small token taken from the children of B'tan. As others debated Tsyala placed it upon a slender finger and focused all energy to a single spot.

Not the l'Khal-Azriul. Not their lost companions.

Instead, it was the city of Anistrali.

B'tan was near the equator beside swelling mountains and upon the other side Anistrali, the city of a race of hermaphroditic beings who carved the masks.

With everyone distracted Tsyala began to plan.

Within the ring was a pocket universe the composite moved within. The larger signal would extend ideas outward but this was focused to a higher degree, like a sniper's bullet.

In a blinding act, the composite crossed the mountains and stood within the city of Anistrali. Focusing all energy within the composite sped through sand and arrived in the underchambers where all began.

She felt her fingers caress each face crumple at his touch. All that was needed was to bleed the sum total of Tsyala in this point of mind for what happened here would happen in the world beyond.

If one's thoughts were powerful enough, they could remake everything without anyone ever knowing.

The signal then. With a command the composite ordered the carvers to inlay one mask against another, letting the mirror-smooth cloth-metal bind seamlessly together.

There was a repository somewhere where the mind began but if the means of thought were changed it would not matter where the thoughts came. It would be the same as a musician capable of playing the most delicate instruments suddenly finding his hands cut and lying useless on the floor. So, the composite set to work . . .

Wait.

It was not voice nor command, it was as if the wind echoed some gesture mistaken for the offspring of a thinking mind.

All the composite needed to do was continue the signal bleeding further now, subconsciously allowing them to place the masks together to keep Tsyralra from ever being alone again.

Wait.

The wind had a still small voice inside the whirlwind.

I must act, Tsyralra said, I am here, now, and with but a single gesture I will change the world.

And then?

Then I will be complete. I will be among my own.

And then?

After the whole of existence would bend to Tsyralra's desire the template of what Tsyralra was would become the template of all life afterward.

And then?

But there was no then. After all things were left perfectly for Tsyralra to use the world would become a country of giants led by Tsyralra.

And what of their desires? the wind asked.

Quite without knowing it her hand reached for a mask, his for another, theirs for a third, and since Tsyralra was simply a construct and the room was not this circular stone gallery of faces but a collection of information with infinite hands the composite reached for infinite masks and put them all one at once, *and saw*.

Tsyralra saw everyone.

Tsyralra saw through the eyes of *everyone*.

Seeing all things from each point of view the composite felt infinitely small. He gazed upon lovers naked in their beds, their faces identical, their minds as distinct as the shores of two varied continents.

She glanced through a sculptor drowning in clay and then felt joy as the artist emerged while left behind was the inversion of her body, a sculpture in reverse.

The composite saw lamprey-mouthed women wandering black caverns, each unique as a fingerprint. The loss of one was the loss of the world, the harm of one the harm of the world.

Suddenly the vision changed and Tsyala saw composites like himself/herself.

The masks were scattered suddenly, each a symphony of others, three voices sharing a single throat, two lusts springing from a single soul.

Yet even as Tsyala wandered the giants' country she was still infinitely alone, he still infinitely alone.

Tsyala had not changed for the world did not change.
It too was alone.

In a blinding thunder of black shadow, Tsyala was back listening as New Anista made plea to *Something* in the dark.

And that *Something* was answering back.

Only after did they notice poor Tsyala upon the floor, mouthing, "I'm sorry," over and over again . . .

Zyalhre sat staring at her creations and creators still enraged beyond repair, desiring to lash at them but refrained herself, feeling her words alone would suffice.

For one can kill with a word if that word is unerringly right.

After the signal and response, after Tsyala was taken to hospital for some undue side effect of spending time in the world's heart the Kirmans sought Zyalhre, knowing their time was brief.

Within the hour there was whisper of some winged messenger coming to take them directly to the continent of glass.

This was the only time Kirman would have left.

They found her by the city's edge having returned from wandering the sands. Since she neither hungered nor thirsted nor slept nor could achieve her pleasures, she instead sought out wastelands for the challenge of finding more creative ways to die.

To date, she hadn't found any.

Since her arrival forever ago Zyalhre was still alive, occupying a body unique as a fingerprint from a one-fingered hand.

"I never imagined," Kirman began, gazing at his goddess standing there, knowing how infinitely she hated each of the tlesac race who had adored her with infinite love, "that I would be seeing you again."

"What do you want?" Zyalhre asked icily.

"We only wanted to see you. There is word we have an audience with the l'Khal-Azriul," First Kirman said, "and so since Kirman had not seen you in so long, I thought it best . . ."

"I have only one question," she asked, raising her hand imperiously before them, "before you leave me here again. Why?"

"Why?"

"Why did you do that to me?"

"We thought to save you, that was all."

"To save me?"

They were sitting in the shadow of a building the colour of wasp's flesh, the sun itching across the dunes, beginning night.

She was aware time had not diminished their love for her, she was their mother, their guardian, and guide and they had rewarded her sacrifices by doing this. *To her.*

Before she was each broad leaf, each tree in the dark green earth and the earth herself, the waters, and even their first words.

Before Zyalhre was the name of their world, a living being spread across sixteen small continents of trees and grass, home to the tlesac whom she foolishly taught.

She named the continents which were her hands and upon them they crawled, rising ever upward from nothing.

Now her hands were ordinary things, as was she.

Rulym had been her first true creation and he tailored the rest, improving them, leading fatefully to these two sitting here. Now she wished to murder her first child upon the sands.

They built whole empires in time, Tlelocia being her favourite for it was the last. Had she still the will to act she would

have silenced her final creation in the womb. Instead, she merely watched them bloom and die till their sun swelled to envelop her.

And she was content with that. Had been content in that.

Instead, the last ones took all she was and granted her true awareness, making her like them to carry her away among the stars.

To save her.

So instead of fire she perished in the cold cursing them for limiting her to this form which would now never end.

"To save me?" She continued. "You should have let me linger in the darkness. I would have been content."

A voice rose from out the darkness.

"Would you have?" the voice asked.

It was Anaxibia uninvited who sat down among them.

"Hello, you must be that planet Kirman talked about."

"This is not your affair," the goddess said, her anger rising by further degrees, "stay out of it."

And the dog laughed. It was such an odd sound, a growl mixed with the soft peal of a child's joy.

"Or what?" Anaxibia asked. "What will you do to me?"

"This is not your concern," First Kirman said, "we need to make amends . . ."

"And why is that?" the dog asked. "Why must you make amends?"

"I have been here forever, occupying these wastelands knowing no pleasure because of them."

"Oh, I see, so they made you wander the sands then?"

"No."

"They brought you to Phyre then?"

"No."

"They hated you enough to destroy you?"

"No," Zyalhre said quietly at the last.

"I thought the children of Zyalhre loved their world. The way I understand it long after the planet died, they never considered themselves anything but your children."

She rose then.

“You know if I were a living being and knew I had been loved by billions for millions of years and after my death my name was a symbol of peace I would rest content even in oblivion’s fire.”

She turned and addressed the Kirmans.

“I don’t think this is really Zyalhre anyway. The being you described wouldn’t have spent forever in a wasteland cursing you every night. That being would have built a garden by now, or changed the world.”

She bid them goodnight and then went on her way.

Without speaking the Kirmans rose and walked after the dog, her tail waving like a signal flag in the dusk.

Zyalhre rose after them, about to reach out her hand as if millennia had not been spent alone in the dark. She called their names but they did not respond anymore.

It was as if a switch had turned finally in their minds.

Zyalhre was not here they reasoned. Zyalhre would have reached out to them lovingly from the start, praised them for saving her, and then spent forever in the company of her children, lovingly embracing each of them.

This was not Zyalhre they reasoned finally.

This was just someone pretending to be Zyalhre, getting each step of her persona wrong while demanding to be treated the same as their goddess had been.

An hour later they left, rising into the dark with the goddess on the ground below still begging and calling out their names before collapsing to the ground, half in tears.

Epilogue to Part II.

Potiphar
Joseph Mikeitz

Egypt in winter, the barges upon the Nile
stuck like insects caught in amber;
the grapes are frozen, the harvest's gone

*Swarms of bees swarm
and wither as they come*

*The houses of Potiphar are cold,
entombed to ice; Egypt in winter,*

idols of frost, the moon's
silver-smoothed glacial shroud.

*droplets of ice grow to grapes, prophet's wine
which died so long ago is again given
life's full measured grace.*

and the dead are dead no more.

Part III.
War

Galon Asykos' Story

Killing
Connie Dykeman

If people kill the animals
just for the sport of killing
some humans should be
butchered off,
if the government is willing.

Chapter 20

God's only mistake

*I am awake and I am finally **here**.*

I reach out my hand and feel it. Ah, I feel the cold stone against my hand. I missed the pure sensation of stone. Were my eyes working I would close them and remember that day I butchered twenty enemies upon such a stone as this.

*Ah! Twenty screaming bodies, all **mine** to possess, to own and butcher for what they'd done to us.*

I still remember your face. When we were the rulers of things we chose such long, foolish names, ten thousand letters to reveal our brilliance . . . I always found them absurd.

You called yourself Ceti-Althrulthis-Talis Ceti-Aldredisl Ceti-Alusthis-Talis. I always preferred to simply call you Talis. It was a beautiful name ruined by excess.

But now your name is gone and I am here.

Do you remember the last day when our Enemy surrounded the hsulan homeworld? We devoured twenty billion in an afternoon, their screams rising to infinity, their small spider bodies crumpling in our jaws.

But they came, our enemies came, fifty million strong . . . I think you committed suicide by then. You alone above us all felt we were monsters and ended yourself before the final battle began.

Fifty million against twelve, thirteen if you had lived.

Six of them survived by the end but it was enough.

Only I survived.

*Why am I telling you this? You aren't here and if you were, you'd know the story intimately. Ah, but they do not know, those reading my will, and I know **they** are there. I feel them peer with small spider eyes into these words, knowing they are wondering who I am, what I am, and who our enemies are.*

I know they are questioning how I know such things but I feel the i'ij around us listening and I would have them understand what I am and why I've come. And what is meant to be . . .

Hahahaha!

I felt him shudder . . . Hahahaha!

I am listening to you listening to me so I will tell my story and you can relay it back to the devil himself.

*Except before you leave, I will make you all **forget** so you will only recall some blunt terror without knowing why.*

But I digress.

I survived by separating mind from body, sealing my soul in a passing asteroid watching my old flesh burn like the ruins of a moon in orbit about the fire that was once Hsulan-Prime. I heard the last hsulan scream as I rejoiced even as the Enemy butchered my corpse to make certain I was dead.

You could have done this but you chose to let oblivion win. Only I had the strength to do the unthinkable so I waited in the void going mad for sixty thousand years.

A human ship arrived and one of them ventured into the pit where my consciousness lay.

I devoured his soul then wore his skin like a misshapen shroud returned the way he came, butchered the others, and gradually learned how to walk and talk like a man.

And I returned hoping to exterminate my enemies only to find them gone.

Though powerful beyond measure, I was an insect in a country of giants, for the age of the machine had come, and there was nothing I could do to defeat them all.

When the last woman died, I pretended I was dead as well, occupying the tattered shroud of a body for eighty years in a grave. After that, I found the appropriate machine to hide within, my existence a virus undetectable.

And so, I have existed for millions of years, observing the new gods of creation.

*But now I am **here**.*

Do you hear me, boy? Do you hear me, stepping across your world? My eyes will rebuild themselves. I did not create a body of flesh to live within. This body merely pretends. My will is great enough to seek

you and corrupt you.

I will outlast my enemies, I will . . .

I hear the others now. They are moving the rubble where my body is pinned, calling to me, I answer them.

*But I will not forget **you**. I will **seek you out!***

. . . If only you could see things my way . . .

Galon Asykos was dragged from the rubble, a smile on his lips despite the bruises. His eyes looked like ragged tears for about a second; before anyone noticed his eyes healed.

Cerminus was there, Serira and Mary.

In the distance upon a dune sat Ambrose Bell. He hadn't tried to help free Galon at all. Beside him sat something else.

At first, Galon assumed it was a person but when it rose he knew it to be a machine.

Mary explained it was a symmlorian.

"A symmlorian?" he asked.

"They are used by the people here for sex."

"Ah, what lovely people must live in this world," Galon sang sweetly.

"Oh, yes, that one isn't exactly a machine."

"No, ghost then? Very stiff-looking mannequin, someone with too few ligaments? Am I close?"

"There's something in it," Cerminus said gruffly, "something alive, like a worm or a parasite."

"Oh, I see. Does it have a name?"

"Balangijal," Cerminus said, "or Balanqijal. I'm not quite sure. Wait, you shouldn't walk, you were under all those stones."

"My dear young man I have no fear of stones nor being stoned. The rocks tried their best and the rocks failed. Besides we are in the middle of hell, are we not? All we need is a devil in our midst and the world might perfectly be."

"What's a devil?" Serira asked.

"Ah, my dear," Galon said, Cerminus and Serira supporting him as he took a few tentative steps up on the dune, "I

will have to tell you about him sometime. For the poor boy owes me something.

“And I’ve come to collect.”

Chapter 21

Balanqijal/Balangijal

At the dune's crest, Ambrose raised his hand but was looking elsewhere. The gesture was meant for Galon, subdued, as if careless.

Which was what Bell could never be.

Glancing down at the ruin Galon marvelled where he ended up. The ship had been thrown against a sheer cliff but had not melted away but shattered.

Perhaps it had been his influence on the thing.

When it shattered the broken pieces turned the cliff wall into a storm of shards; the others had escaped but not Galon.

Galon turned and addressed Bell at last.

"I can see your concern for me knows no bounds."

"Yeah, and I can see I wasn't needed."

Bell was a slightly rotund man, rounded, his head bald. One imagined an egg somehow yet the eyes betrayed something else. While everyone else on the ship, even Marchen, considered Galon amusing and friendly Bell kept his distance. And wished he could do so now.

His persona was of an art dealer who had kidnapped a young man during a war. He had compelled him to make painting after painting, intending to eventually kill him and pass the pieces off as the works of a master.

Mordant at least had the excuse of being evil.

Bell didn't even care about money.

He simply wished to know if it could be done.

Now, wearing the persona of this individual the one sitting before Galon had the same sensation of disgust he had on the ship. It was as if Bell knew the geology, no, the taxonomy of what he was staring at, the exact species of vice.

And he hoped Galon had simply died where the stones fell.

"So," Galon turned now to the machine next to his enemy, "I understand you are an alien. How fascinating! I am an alien too, here at least."

"I was sent to find the survivors of the ship. Are you all that survived?"

"I saw three other vessels escape," Mary said, "so hopefully there are more of us."

"Oh, yes hopefully, always have hope, essential to being human. Are you a human by any chance? Are all humans here worms or is it just you?"

The machine looked humanoid and had a vague tan to its appearance. The eyes were solid pools of blue and the thin thread of a mouth revealed no teeth. If it was smiling no one could tell. Nor could Galon tell if his words hit a nerve.

"We must proceed. Day has just started and the sun will be high. Charanix is near at hand. We must proceed there and from there seek out my master."

"Amazingly, we understand you," Galon said, "my alien is a little rusty. Are you a little rusty as well?"

The machine turned lockstep away from Galon and started moving, the others following, of course, Galon making bad insults all the time which the others found somewhat amusing.

Bell merely grimaced.

The more Galon tried to sound glib the more Bell knew he was a dangerous thing. He simply couldn't pinpoint why yet.

"So how did you get your name?" Galon asked.

They had been walking for less than an hour, the sun becoming its own source of pain. The machine in lockstep crossed the sands, Mary struggling, Cerminus and Serira moving swiftly.

Galon and Bell were struggling, Bell always behind Galon.

It wasn't a sign of respect. Since his emergence into flesh Bell never turned his back on Galon though couldn't explain why.

Now after their trudge through the dunes, Galon asked the machine the purpose of its name. Not the name itself, merely where it came from.

"I chose it many years ago."

"Fascinating name, truly fascinating. So, we should merely trust you and your flawless, perfect name?"

Balanqijal turned back then and came toward Galon.

He wasn't certain why this man so infuriated him but as he approached Galon didn't flinch nor move an inch behind.

He simply stood, smiling, staring at those solid blue eyes as if he found the entire ordeal impossibly funny.

"Oh, I do apologize," Galon said at last, "I am nothing but a machine after all, taking the form and mannerisms of a man who always thought himself funny. The man who laughed. That's me. I'm the man who laughed."

"You do not fear me," the cool eyes and perfect symmetry of the body said, "and you are going out of your way to antagonize me. I could leave you here, all of you," he spread his arms wide in an arc, "and simply report to my master I failed. He would understand."

"Oh, yes, utterly, he would understand how a being of such power as yourself couldn't bring a few exiles from another planet to him, while, perhaps, just perhaps, two other gatherings of people were brought into his midst, or three?

"Yes, I'm *sure* he would understand," Galon said then smiled a wicked smile. "Tell me where did you get that *bizarre* little name?"

Keep talking, Bell thought to himself. *Keep talking and let me keep listening to you. Something may be missing from me but I am a good student. Keep talking . . .*

"Did you say something?" Galon asked Bell casually.

"I said nothing, old friend. If I had I'm sure you would have heard it."

"Oh, I'm sure if you're saying anything important, I'll hear it. I always do," Asykos said.

Chapter 22
Four billion assassins
in search of God

I was on Arulus a time.

The trenches were etched forward like the tip-point of a spear and I remember thinking, how can they move themselves forward into the artillery line without anyone to help, and I was assigned to go with them to the front lines.

Zaphan was behind us, that province of Mars where the wine rivers were. There were names, oh god there were so many names. Xaich on the Arodrift Sea, the factories of K'xhalile, Iscalaris, Yscharis, Tlahcalios and Karnessos, Salleos where love was born for me and Zhalizorn where you died.

And Acoranaria where the enemy resided.

And those were just the names of the cities, the countries I press as leaves pressed in a book to be preserved as litany.

So that I will never forget.

I was there in Arulus on the front lines and above us giant silver-laced moths flew and I kept thinking how absurd to die because one of them dropped a bomb on us and our last thoughts gazing at something one might find in a novel by Ochalna Muscaliel, moths and butterflies and chess pieces and old men lusting after young girls . . . to die because of something one might vaguely notice in a novel you'd read, waiting for a train.

And I was there tending the wounded taken from drowning trenches where they collected fire, not rain, I looking into your eyes and yours and yours, seeing days ebb out of you like drops of amber in an hourglass . . . such stupid things, recalling a poem in the middle of the carnage, even whispering that line, "amber in an hourglass," you staring at me mouthing the same, remembering it because it was something you'd read in childhood and hoped to go back to today, to undo all the years, the battles, the choices leading you this way and become again a boy, a girl, and simply sit and play and never grow up, never become

anything more than a small child listening to your father and your mother.

But you passed away and minutes later the bombs fell, carrying me away.

I think someone said "Mary" before but I'm not sure.

I think that was my name . . .

"What are you thinking about?" Cerminus asked.

By now they had reached the city their guide had spoken of, tall and jagged towers as if half-devoured by the sand and storm.

Serira had almost collapsed by this point, Galon required Balanqijal to help him cross the threshold and Bell was behind, still watching everyone cautiously.

"I was thinking about the past. How about yourself?"

"I was thinking about Crassus at Carrhae," he said simply, "and the way he looked when I killed him."

"Does it ever end?" she asked. "Those thoughts plaguing us?"

"We chose these lives," Cerminus said simply, "chose to remember this, to become this. Are we not here to finish our education, to know what it is to fully *be*?"

"Yes," she replied, "that is why we came."

And yet in the back of her mind, she wondered if it was the wisest thing to go seeking those who had lived and died in trenches and fire and war. And as she wondered she noticed a creature flying overhead, half-imagining it to be a moth.

She shuddered as she entered the city of violence.

Chapter 23
The comforting lies we tell
ourselves at night

Crawling along corset-wire streets was a slug with metallic spines along its back. In a moment a woman emerged the colour of a bright ocean who plucked the creature up and then impaled it with a spine jutting jaggedly from the knuckles of her wicked left hand.

Her face was concealed neath a mask with small rivulets of scarlet etched into it, the mask of an angry lustng god.

Once the beast stopped she dropped the beast and went on her way, singing as she went.

"Welcome to the city of Charanix," their guide said. "From here we go to Tlahcila but there is time to shelter from the heat."

They walked by, noticing women circling one another surrounded by others who seemed the same as them.

And they would duel, spines jutting, tearing into one another leaving one dead and the other badly wounded who just as often fell herself into the dust moments later.

"Why are they doing this?" Mary asked.

"Their bodies are adapted for the duel. They have names for these rituals. The l'Khasryel, the l'Khaliryel, or even the l'Khalazryel, each of which means some ornate version of what they are doing."

"What are they doing?" Cerminus asked.

"Killing each other of course."

Galon gave names to them. Or put another way he took the time to give names to them, stepping over the dying gingerly, smiling down at them then calling them one thing or another.

"You look just like an Ariqijiel to me. It means ghost in certain worlds. Oh, and you, you look exactly like Eiresgia, and you . . . hmmm? Oriczja, this young thing I knew back on Earth, and you are Tad Caburn and you two are Airesgial and Aresgiel, the twins. Though I suppose you're all twins . . ."

Bell grabbed him and spun him about.

"What are you *doing*?"

"Making small talk of course," Galon said.

"To people dying in the streets!"

Bell bent down to one of the wounded and tried to help her up but she perished in his arms instead.

"Oh, if you can't see the lighter side you shouldn't be alive," Galon replied. "I can fix that problem of yours you know. Being alive."

Bell stared at Galon as he merrily wandered on, singing as he went, following the others as they found a place to rest their heads. And all the time Bell sat staring into the dead eyes of her whom he'd never known . . .

Almost like a human being would.

In his dreams, Bell imagined two worlds. One was a planet all of air, the other all of shadow. One had people of air on it, the other people of shadow. There were rivers of air and cities of air and beasts of air, or rivers of shadow or cities of shadow or beasts of shadow. And neither one could he touch at all.

And he saw beneath each one a poison carried within them, a villain beneath each life and none without.

Then the golden decline of being began and the poison was released to rot cancer-wise into each of us, giving flesh and sinew and bone to our desire.

He awakened to the bed the colour of burnt amethyst and the room with the table softly breathing in the corner and imagined it was no dream at all but *Something* speaking to him out of the corner of *Its* mind.

He came to the window staring out and saw a small woman with butterfly wings darting across the air only to be impaled by a spine issued from a sapphire hand as the poor creature struggled, screamed, and was devoured without a word.

And he was reminded of Wyneguard and the day the poor boy died . . .

Chapter 24
Too many hours in
this midnight season

The children of Charanix were an entire race obsessed with the duel. They gave it elaborate names but they always regressed to the shedding of lives.

"Life is proved intelligent by its suicide, not its being," Galon said when the duels were fully explained after a fitful night's sleep, "wouldn't you say Rusty?"

Balanqijal had been given a new name. He ignored it.

"You never explained why the duel matters so much," Mary said, likewise ignoring Galon.

In the distance several of the children of Charanix were seen, each circling again as if nothing had changed at all.

"All life here lives again," Balanqijal said, "all who die come again."

"Sounds erotic," Galon joined in.

Everyone ignored him.

"As such, being that their bodies are made for fighting they fight, knowing they will be given the chance to fight again."

"And they always have the same bodies?" Bell asked.

"That is usually the way of things."

While they discussed Galon continued making up names for the duellists. Cerinus of course, based on his good friend's name. Over there Syar Caldolous of Eiresgiel has taken the name from an old Chivalric Romance of the 81st century. And there was Wagram and Cuachicqueh and Uliat and Uliriat . . . he stopped a moment, trying to recall each foolish little allusion.

The battle of Wagram? Check.

Cuachicqueh were the Aztec Shorn Ones, those deadliest in battle. Check.

Uliat was another name for Goliath. Check.

Uliriat? He just liked the sound of that name.

But why the allusions? Why make yet another foolish little joke, even to himself?

*All the little toys running about that I will break. Why not put my truth over them? I see you little Cerinus, I see you dying, **hello**, and Uliat, poor little Uliat, I know you have a name but to me, you will always be Goliath moments before the rock hit you upside the head.*

All the little toys I will be so happy to . . .

"Galon?"

"Hmm? Yes?"

"Our meal is over and we have to reach Tlahcila next," Cerminus said. "It's time to go."

"Ah, but shouldn't you fight one of them first? You were a soldier in another life, wouldn't you enjoy circling her, that one there, drawing your blade and fighting as if no time passed you by? Don't you miss your glory days?"

Cerminus had considered the idea of fighting, and had imagined himself surrounded by them, blade drawn, but he rejected the idea for one reason.

He could die.

Though they resurrected he didn't know if he could.

"Perhaps," Bell said icily at the table as the others rose, "Galon himself would like to duel one of them? Test his mettle against a worthy opponent?"

"Oh, my good friend but you see, I have a major weakness which means I cannot fight."

"And what weakness is that?"

"I am an invertebrate coward who will whimper and beg at the first sign of a superior force against me."

With that the liar rose and Bell trailed after.

To leave the city Balanqijal would have to gain the aid of an i'ij, a creature of shadow and mist capable of taking any form. Its master requested such a thing to come and now they needed only wait upon the city's edge. As they did Cerminus glanced behind him.

During the night he imagined himself at Carrhae again. His persona had fought so long before, his plumed arrows impaling his Roman foes. His name was nothing but Crassus' last cry screaming something which Cerminus had enjoyed.

His own name was the cry of the man he murdered.

He had another name of course but in taking the persona the machine desired only to be called Cerminus. It was a mistake since each persona was meant to portray the life they became and claiming one's name as something else subtly altered everything that came of it. Or so the machines believed.

But if he had called himself Jasher, Ereuthalion, Eupolis, or Uliat and kept still these memories close to him as leaves pressed into the pages of a book he would still be the same person, he assumed.

They waited all night at the city's edge, Cerminus drawing his name in the sand, changing it, becoming Cehminus or Clerminus or Cerinus. Yet he felt no different.

And Galon for a time said nothing either but merely stared mutely at the stars as if speaking to them silently, and as if the stars understood all the things he'd said.

It was the first time in forever Cerminus imagined Galon had some hidden depth and was not the mere fool his persona was which the machine had taken for reasons unexplained.

Finally at midnight the sea of mist came and carried them away, itself saying not a word.

And giving forth no name.

Chapter 25

Live to see the other side of midnight

I remember Carrhae. I remember the heat raining down on us like the rain, rivulets of sweat pouring, the scent of manure in the distance where some of our horses were and ahead of us men come to claim our lands as their own.

I was sent forward with the others, our horses panting in the heat and the damnable sands because each footfall took more strength for our mounts to move till we crashed against them like a wave.

Then retreat and at the last moment we each turned back as they pursued, firing our parting shots.

Parthian archers. Now you know the origin of the name.

That day thirty thousand came and those we did not slaughter ran away. But it was Crassus their general I remember.

Strange, because I am not this persona, but rather using his life as my guide I must use each facet of what is known.

In one history Crassus died approaching before ever reaching camp to parley with us, in another he was not simply killed but molten gold poured down his hungry throat, his decapitated head melting on the sands.

And I was there, saw him die, but was also there when gold was poured as the sizzling sound of metal cooling took on a semblance of a name no history books record. It is a branching out of a potential into the unreal, yet I know it.

I know it.

And my name is the name that cursed thing uttered, which might never have uttered anything, at all.

Cerminus.

This was the name the persona used, even to his last day, even if he never heard it, even if Crassus never uttered it or his head was never filled with molten gold because I believe it so.

We pretend we understand, Mary and Bell and Galon and Serira. But we are just pretending these lives were ever ours.

Mary mentioned once to me that there on Zaphan they had priests reciting from an ancient book some holy script and one of the commandants given was thou shall commit adultery.

Shall. Not shall not.

And I read it and know from where the mistake came yet from her perspective that mistaken commandant was as if divine.

My name is Cerminus, and I fought at Carrhae.

But who I am I haven't a chance to tell. Not even to myself.

I don't know what we even are . . .

"Are you awake?"

Cerminus was jostled to wakefulness by Mary. They had been collected up in an ocean of mist only to be set down again upon another city.

Balanqijal explained the i'ij would only take them this far because it only desired to obey this much.

Another would come, either a winged messenger or something else.

Now they had come unto the city of Tlahcila to wait.

It was utterly unlike where they had been before.

The people here were all women too but they were violet and the streets and buildings were oddly symmetrical. Nothing jagged here, each building seemed a rounded shell, no, Mary caught herself and considered differently. Not a shell. A corpse.

Yes, each building was like the rounded body of a dead thing.

As they passed along, they watched as one of the women wearing the mask of a rat suddenly spasmed in pain and reclined against a far wall. Mary went to her, Ambrose Bell following, Balanqijal stared passively on and Galon grinned.

She examined the woman to realize her skin was hard as a diamond retching in abject pain beside a wall.

"What is it?" she asked Balanqijal finally. "What is happening to her?"

“She is giving birth,” the parasite in the machine said.
“There is nothing you can do to stop it.”

As Mary watched the woman’s stomach seemed to bulge outward and before anyone could react it blossomed open, five points emerging like a flower’s head from its stem.

And within and now without crawled small-bodied things no larger than a worm, each the colour and consistency of glass. And then they writhed in the dirt, dying, becoming still as the woman they tended rose, her wounds closed and without breaking stride crushed the few still living offspring underfoot.

Then she went on her way.

But Bell noticed tears out of the corner of her eye.

Balanqijal explained the “children” were nothing more than cancerous echoes, replicas of what their children would have been anywhere but here.

Here they were nothing more than bland living machines with no more awareness than a grain of sand.

Still, Mary picked those broken bodies and almost heard a few crying out, moaning for their mother.

And later she and Bell buried them, eleven in all, and Mary even recited from the sacred Book of Jasher in which was written the war of the peoples of the Lord.

Then they went on their way as the sun uprose its angry head again . . .

Chapter 26

Einherjar

Later that day as all slept Serira struggled a time. Her body was soaked to the skin and her eyes searched the room. It was oddly barren with nothing except the bed and a table breathing in a corner.

Strange how easy it had been to get the room.

There was no difficulty at all. Their guide had asked and just as simply asked as answered and the rooms were provided.

She turned her jaguar eyes up to the ceiling and tried to drift to sleep but sleep eluded her.

Of course, the entire world was backward here. Night was day, day was night. Birth was death and if believed all the dead were now newly returned.

Not newly.

Yet the signal had only come recently.

Where had they been all the time before?

Her black spotted body could not tell whether she was meant for rest or wakefulness and with these questions plaguing her let her senses drift beyond the room to catch everything in an hourglass of her perception.

This planet stank of age. She caught the scent of unending years, the shapes of time etching into everything. Planets were old of course, billions of years . . . but this felt more massive as if dwarfing everything around it as if the age of the planet were a giant dwarfing and warping each aspect of the planet herself.

Herself?

On the tread of almost catlike feet, she went to the window, gazing out. Yes, she could imagine this world was a she. Had not Kirman once said they changed their world to a woman before the final apocalypse of their sun?

Yet what sort of woman would *this* world be?

Not kind. No certainly not kind. Yet Serira could not call it cruel. Yes, they had seen duellists and dead children given a

mockery of birth but she was descended from a jaguar, uplifted from a species which hunted and yet took no great pleasure in the ending of things.

She was not cruel nor kind. Was there some lesson to the geography of things then, she some mentor meant to teach all flesh a lesson written in their bones?

Was all this some prophecy, some brilliant path meant to etch into the bodies of all peoples here some truth and a means of a final escape, some everlasting grace to be achieved upon the other side?

She had a terrible thought, an absurdly funny thing.

She imagined a man straddling the globe in possession of some power allowing him to see the future and all the permutations of fate. This man would see humanity in some future time extinguished and then do all he could to change it.

He would lead armies across creation, battle across countless worlds, build a religion in his name and his son perhaps would take on the perversion of some god-thing and rule for. . . say 3,501 years, all to achieve the aim of saving mankind.

He would be a tyrant and make humanity bend its knee to him and have armies of women, thinking them more kind, and have a friend who tried to kill him repeatedly and then die again and again and again as a result and die at the hands of those seeking to end his rule, all orchestrated by him of course, but at the end, mankind would be safe and scattered.

Then there would be sequels, lots and lots of sequels getting worse all the time . . .

She imagined such a thing absurd and didn't know why it came to her.

Then she knew.

For it was not the ending of things that mattered. It was not the finishing that determined the value of the thing created.

It was the thing itself.

For a man to believe the saving of the world was enough justification for suffering, enough reason to cause forever to be spent in pain, to believe the prevention of the end justified the actions taken by such a man would not only be cruel but cowardly, not only cowardly but vain. A predator knew better.

Serira glanced across at the houses and the sleeping bodies and remembered each hunt, and smell of each urine-soaked corpse and felt the scar along her cheek, the one she had recreated when this body she took to be her own again.

A boar had done it, slashing at her and she at him for she had to feed and he had to defend himself.

But if that had been the ending of her life, she would not have preserved it a second longer. She had been true to her nature and to pretend to be something to survive would have been blasphemy in kind.

Even now knowing she was a machine, feeling this body wash over her knowing her memories she took comfort in this.

For she had chosen this willingly.

If she had not existed before becoming Serira it was enough she was Serira now and when she died, if she would be resurrected here it would be enough to know she had been Serira and lived her death according to how she lived her life.

Even as a duellist or a woman of stone so long as she recalled who she was she would not bend to being less than that.

And if at death she faded or suffered darkness?

To have been Serira was enough payment if only to be her for a time . . .

She retired to bed and slept soundly until the coming of the night.

Chapter 27

The lindwyrn prince

They rode the sky a time after leaving Tlahcila.

They crossed the air on the back of a great falcon with iron-bright feathers, Galon mentioning how often he'd flown before.

"Of course, seatbelts were a must in my day," he said, grinning at Balanqijal who did not grin back.

Bell had spent the previous day talking with their guide. Balanqijal was an endradi, a knight of the l'Khal-Azriul, the lord of the world.

The endradi were soldiers, their form normally that of a small parasite in the blood known as an ascaliel. Normally it was not granted sentience, being merely a receiver allowing its host to perceive another life across the sea of black upon the shores of Watyr.

But his master had given him thought and will and ordered him to take up the original armour of a man and so become a man, though armed with things more than human.

The endradi were given blades, small swords, and skill.

And his purpose was to lead the wayward exiles to the land above, to the continent of glass.

Had he learned if any others survived?

No.

But he would not have known for the master was known to keep secrets and he would not have relayed such truths to him.

Now they flew on toward Tsohanoai. And all the time Galon kept on talking.

They first noticed the city when they noticed the sky darken. Ahead was a pillar of smoke rising upward, even unto space herself.

Their guide explained this was because of the factories of the city which produced great poisons. To keep these poisons from killing the world his master shielded the rest of the sky and

air against them, leaving a long corridor for the poisons to escape upward.

In time the factories would no longer produce this. In time.

“How long have the factories existed?” Mary asked.

Since the dawn of forever, Balanqijal replied.

And so, they entered the city of the children of Gaonin.

Before they entered each was given a mask, Galon given the mask of a rat, Bell of a wasp, Serira of a child, and Mary of a man. Cerminus received a mask with only eyes and nothing else.

All these they would need to wear constantly to survive.

The smog roiled all the buildings into shadows. The corridor leading upward meant that there was a definable barrier between the world outside and the world within. Within all was grey, nearly impossible to see twenty feet ahead.

Balanqijal became a form of lightning, his body illuminated in the burning embers of the air.

People clustered about all wearing masks, women with dark skin and mouthless faces. Cerminus noticed one or another passing by, none of whom wore masks. They had them though, he noticed one in a woman’s hand but didn’t need to wear them here.

Their bodies had evolved to survive the poisoned air.

Without mouths, they spoke by colour, bright illuminations Cerminus could see, flashes of yellow and green and malachite and he felt his own skin itching of malachite runes and signs and glancing down saw his arms brighten. His anger became a patch of sunlight in a sunless land.

It happened to the others as well.

Soon enough all were speaking in light and colour and thin lines of one shade or another determined what one was saying.

They were like chameleons and Cerminus noticed the women had patches of invisibility along their arms and legs and thighs, places he could see through them. A disease their guide

explained which could make them unseeable but even then, the disease never took their entire selves away.

There was no place to wait here; they could not stop for a bed or a meal. They had only to cross through this wasteland of cement and steel, listening to the pounding of engines in the dark as if each building were a leviathan hungrily breathing, their hearts writhing in their frames desperate to escape.

And all the time Bell returned again and again to Wyneguard and that final day . . .

I took him from his home.

My men brought him to me and I showed him what I wanted him to do. I knew his talent and he was talented then. I let him the freedom of a cage and set him to work and he worked each day and every day and every night until he mastered the copies I needed then when finished I shot him in his cell . . .

I knew him as a young man.

I taught him and showed him what he could achieve. I knew his parents. I had dinner with them. I still remember the white walls, her pouring out tears in my cup, their son smiling up at me and I smiling down at him . . .

I knew him as a young child.

His parents were friends of mine and we went fishing on the river Arne and Wyneguard loved to swim and I was there, going back further and further, as if to the moment of his birth then moving forward I was there on the day of his death.

A death I caused.

And he begged me not to but I wanted to see it through, to see if it would work, which it did. His paintings were sold. His parents wept and I was never caught. Never caught. Never caught.

I gave everything I had to those refugees after the war then went looking for death in all the wrong places since I always survived.

I died an old man, my secret safe at last. I was buried next to the boy I murdered. They called me a compassionate man . . .

In the dark, the factories thundered on forever like the roars of an angry god. If one could see through smog they might have imagined the buildings to be wyrms and wyverns writhing in the dark.

Had Ambrose Bell a mirror to see his self he might have imagined he had become wyrmlike himself, his form no longer human.

Had he a mirror he might have known. But he suspected the truth already.

The persona he chose had never really been human anyway, just been pretending to be a man as Bell was pretending to be him.

Instead, it had been a thing of myth, a thing composed and sustained by ice within its veins, like a lindwyrn prince.

They all walked on in silence waiting for the sun to roar its angry head as the women clustered about and with the light sang joyfully in silence then.

For this city and its horrors were a paradise to them . . .

They reached the other side in safety and waited for a messenger to come.

And all the time each could feel Galon grinning beneath his mask.

Chapter 28

The blades that melt in blood

I am Serira. I was created from a jaguar into a woman yet kept my former senses and my former life.

As a woman, I was the captain of a ship called the Astryanax and when reborn I was the one who named our vessel as we exiled ourselves from Earth. It was as if the two ships were one, as if no time passed at all.

When I was captain, I fought a great war against the xenixaran race who were like moths burning from a candle's flame and we who were their predators, devouring the same, being devoured the same, since the fires we set burnt us as well.

And when the war ended it was as if no violence had ever been, as if we'd never acted, they'd never acted, we'd never killed, they'd never killed us.

A whole portion of my life was erased because it was inconvenient at a later age.

How am I to explain those lost years to myself?

When I was the captain of the Astryanax I was the same as I am now. And yet when I think of that time before I condemn myself, pretend I hadn't killed, pretend I was only a creature of flesh and blood.

Seeing all this now I embrace it all and hope that when I had only been a creature of flesh and blood, if given time, I could have done the same.

That is the only difference between us and the living. Time.

Time does not wound us nor harm us. We are not the slaves of time.

We are only the servants of memory . . .

They had arrived at Onoskelis. Beyond this point was the tower city of Vologoesia and from there the country of the l'Khal-Azriul. Galon seemed oddly eager to find the way. But they had to remain in Onoskelis first.

It was a city fashioned upon a terrible violence.

The sula doraë, the children of Onoskelis were like several of the previous cities, all possessed of women. Yet they also seemed somewhat insectlike, with antennas upon their heads and the black and yellow bodies of certain wasps given human shape.

Yet there was also a strand of white chitin running along their brows and it was this which their guide pointed to when showing them the sula doraë race. The whiter the band became the more inclined to violence they were until any with a white-hot mark along their Cainlike brow would be one to avoid.

For this reason, though they wore masks their foreheads remained untouched and naked, else one would never know if a murderer was in one's midst.

Balanqijal stayed close to all of them and indicated they would have to move carefully across the hive-rounded city to where the winged messenger was.

As they walked, they watched men slaughtered and children, beings fashioned for this purpose.

They were symlorians, he said.

As they walked several of the sula doraë began to notice Galon most of all. There neath the bronze-tinged buildings they each turned blue eyes to him and he continued to find subtle mockery in this.

But his mockery seemed to be failing him.

And all the time Ambrose Bell kept behind, he the last in their procession always allowing Galon to go ahead, and the more they walked the more he recalled that day in May when Wyneguard had to die.

He had almost forgotten the boy's name, it was so close, he could almost taste it if only he remembered then the agony would be complete, the subtle anguish, the . . .

"Robert MacKenize," Galon said absently, "his name was Robert . . ." Then he stopped himself as the others turned.

"How did you know that?" Ambrose asked.

"I read about him about your victim . . . obviously."

Balanqijal edged closer and from his arm, he drew a blade, curved and sharp. And all the time the sula doraе clustered closer now.

"Really? Did you read his name? Why? I can't imagine someone as self-obsessed as you would have paid attention to my life. And if *I* didn't remember his name, how could you?"

"You know me, I enjoy a bit of knowledge."

"I can't believe that either," Cerminus said, "I remember the people I fought with, died with. How could you remember something Bell couldn't in Bell's own life?"

Galon turned to Bell, a slow rage building across his face.

"What trickery is this? I simply answered your question."

"There's only one problem with that," Bell said. "I hadn't said anything. I just *thought it*."

And the dawning realization crossed Galon's face.

"Oh," he said slowly, "I see."

"You read my mind, didn't you? I suspected something was wrong with you but couldn't put my finger on it. The way you behaved, not like any one of us. You know I never trusted you."

"I know," Galon said finally, bitterly, his voice now no longer casual or light but hard and cold, "what luck to be trapped on the sands with *you*. But it hardly matters. Your master is waiting and we have many miles to go before we sleep . . ."

"The master will understand if we arrive one short."

Balanqijal drew his blade. "After all, if you are killed here, I need only find you later in another city at a later time. Hardly trouble for me."

"Don't threaten me, boy, I am much more powerful than you ever were or will ever be."

"And what are you exactly?" Bell asked. "You're not human, you're not xenixaran, you're not of R'xuhan Prime. What species are you exactly?"

Galon lowered his head and then laughed. It was a terrible sound, so sharp and hard the sula doraе retreated, itching back

step by step. It was the way thunder sounds to children or the way an ocean sounds to a drowning man.

Then he raised his head, staring directly at Bell.

"I am a Harvester," he said simply. And Balanqijal retreated several steps.

"That is what I am. I was trapped on Earth all that time, pretending to be one of you and when I heard the signal I knew, *I knew* I was not alone." He turned to Balanqijal, savagely grinning now. "You know what I am. Has your master told you about me and mine?"

"Yes, he told me you were all extinct."

"Yet my essence survived, first in the humans then the machines, now a human shape again. I had hoped to reach your country of glass and find your little king and corrupt him but I was stopped," turning to Bell, "so I must change my plans."

They saw Galon's eyes change, grow yellow and black. There in the wasp-city they watched the man transform and Balanqijal screamed to run which all others did save Ambrose Bell who lunged at Galon Asykos, pinning him to the ground.

There was no thought for anything else. He had a suspicion no matter what action he took Galon's first act would be to exterminate him and whether he ran or fought the outcome remained the same.

So, he chose to fight.

Bell's fingers wrapped around Galon's throat but then Bell felt the fire welling up in his chest and looking down saw a white stain blistering there. Galon burnt a hole through Bell's chest, letting it slowly bloom like petals from his back as he screamed in agony, and before he could do anything he was obliterated.

Then Galon stood screaming and shattered every building around him like they were nothing but glass.

He turned toward Mary, imagining all he might do to her, to Serira, to Cerminus, then felt them coming.

The i'ij.

A wall of mist was coming and though he could have slaughtered them knew the l’Khal-Azriul was now aware of him. Would he come as well to the city of violence?

The element of surprise gone Galon Asykos decided to leave, but first, he uttered one word.

“Pain,” he said.

And for each assembled the universe exploded in agony.

Cerminus collapsed watching a star devour itself while Serira stood upon a jungle, Mary beside her as they saw the damnable thing coming down toward them.

At first, she wasn’t sure what she was looking at.

Across the ocean-pale sky, there seemed something slowly crossing it. It crossed the threshold of the upper atmosphere and Mary imagined she heard the sound of metallic wings.

Then they realized what they were looking at even while Cerminus watched the sun be slowly consumed by itself, no, not by itself, by something in the shadow of the sun feasting on the fire like water.

Mary and Serira saw a creature spanning the sky, almost like a wasp. Perhaps that too had been what undid him, finally surrounded by the echoes of the things he used to be, reduced and limited to almost nothing but just enough to remind him anyway.

A great wasp assailed the skies and with its maw began to devour the jungle which Mary and Serira occupied. And they were devoured, swept up into its jaws and in the void of its body were torn apart, each knowing whole worlds had been consumed this way with no hope, no hope, no . . .

They awakened back to the city as the oceans of mist arrived, Balanqijal’s blade melted in the sand.

Galon had taken the time to break it by cutting himself and letting drops of his life smear upon the steel.

It was his final taunt as something almost human.

He was saying “I could have killed you if I wanted but you aren’t worth the effort child.”

Then came the messengers who carried them away but not before Balanqijal gave a command which they would *have* to obey. Even the winds would obey now for the winds were afraid.

“Find Ambrose Bell, bring him to our master. Do not delay. He is somewhere in the world. Find him. He was the only one who saw through that demon’s skin. We shall need him. Go *now* and do not delay. The rest of us shall see our king. Spare no time, and make no delays. Phyre is in jeopardy.

“It is Ragnarok today.”

Epilogue to Part III.

The War
Georg Heym

Now he has arisen; he, who slept so long,
from the depth arisen, out of arches strong.
Huge he stands unknown in the twilight land,
and the moon he crushes in his blackened hand.

Broad on city's evening, broad and angrily
shadow falls, and frost of strange obscurity
makes the markets bustle stop in icy scare.
Silence reigns. They turn, and no one is aware.

In the street, it comes to touch her shoulders light;
just a question. Answerless. A face goes white.
From afar sound whining abbey bells so thin
and the beards are quaking round the pointed chin.

High up, on the mountains, he begins to dance,
and he cries; you fighters, rise up and advance!
Echoes sound: around his shaking, blackened head
swings a chain of skulls he wrenched from a thousand dead.

Towerlike he squashes embers' dying gleam
and, where the day is fleeing, fills with blood the stream.
Countless are the corpses swept into the reeds,
covered by white feathers, where the vulture feeds.

He stands over ramparts blue of flames around,
over darkened streets with heavy weapons sound,
over broken gates where gatemen lie across,
over bridges bending under human dross.

Through the night he chases fire across the world:
red-fanged hound of hell with a savage scream unfurled.
Out of darkness leaps dominions of night,
frightful at its border shine volcanoes bright.

And a thousand redcaps, pointed far and wide,
litter up the dark plain, flicker up astride.
Who below in alleys still runs to and fro
he sweeps in the fire, that it hotter grow.

And the flames are leaping, burning tree by tree.
Yellow bats of fire clawing endlessly.
And he thrusts his kin-staff, dark and charcoal-bound
deep amongst the trees to stoke the flames around.

An important city choked in yellow glow,
jumped without a whisper to the depths below,
while he stands, a giant, over glowing urns,
wild, in bloody heavens, thrice his torch he turns

over storm-strung clouds reflecting fiery brands,
to the deadly dark of frigid desert sands,
down he pours the fire, withering the night,
phosphorous and brimstone on Gomorrha bright.

Part IV.
Famine

Alan Douglas' Story

The God of The City
Georg Heym

Upon a block of houses, he sits wide.
The wind encamps all black around his brow.
Irate he stares at far solitudes that stray
beyond the fields from the last few houses.

In the evening glows the ruddy gut of Baal,
the greatest cities kneel to him like choirs.
A monstrous heap of church bell after church bell
up to him swells from dark a sea of spires.

The music drones a Corybantes dance
of millions ambling loudly through the streets.
The chimney smoke, the clouds of manufacture
unto him cling, the blue scent of incense sweet.

The weather smoulders in his eyebrows twain.
The dark of evening unto night is dulled.
The storm winds flutter like great vultures gazing
from out his great locks, in his wrath all horrid.

His butcher fist into the dark he soars.
He shakes it so. A sea of fire hunts
the length of one street. And the hot smoke roars
consuming it, until the morning comes.

Chapter 29
The infinite war
of year zero

They were playing surakarta in the room of games.

They were moving their pieces, circling them about the corners of the board, striking their opponents one by one. The game was played upon what seemed almost a castle, four towers flattened and the curving paths of each rounded corner could lead even into the centre itself.

The game was played between two of the machines.

Had they played this before? Of course.

The trick was deciding how to differ from what had gone before. Each piece could potentially circle only so many times and since their personas both loved the game, they knew each move their former selves had made.

So, how to differ from this then?

If one knew there was an infinite number of choices, and one knew not to make what choice a previous persona made, how many choices were left until they were run dry?

Potentially infinite of course.

But in truth even if one could do everything there was no reason to assume one *would* do everything.

Surely a man could walk from his home to his place of work an infinite number of ways, choosing paths across distant continents, walking the stars first, walking backward, and crossing the entire globe just to reach his place of work which was only a five-minute walk away.

One could do potentially anything but one would more likely do that which made the most logical sense or at least the most logical sense to them. Therefore, in playing the game the goal was not to do *anything* but to do the opposite of what their previous selves had done.

But since the rules were exact and the number of plays fixed upon what was available and most profitable one could not

play opposite to the logic of the game.

There were only so many patterns available and these patterns did not depend upon the number of fingers or eyes one had nor upon the colour of one's skin, one's age, one's gender, or one's beliefs. There were only so many ways to play the game.

The rules never changed and the board stayed the same.

The two made their moves knowing this, repeating a game begun half a billion years before till one finally declared himself the victor.

Previously each had taken the opposite strategies so that their rival won.

But though they differed in each other's strategies these were simply fixed points capable of falling to anyone, if given enough time.

Winning or losing did not mean new patterns were created, they only meant new people were employing older means and ways.

Neither the pattern nor the board ever really changed . . .

And then the ship was torn in fire and storm.

Chapter 30
Beast screaming
defiance at world's end

Alan Douglas opened his eyes to see a face staring into his own. Before this, there had been fire and night and the world suddenly rose to meet him as he fell. Now there was a face staring into his own. It looked like a woman's face, masked. Removing this she revealed something not like a woman at all.

At first, his only point of reference was that jungle he was in back during a war with some obscure name attached to it.

He had been sitting on a rotten log careful there were no ants in it first and a thing had crawled along his hand. It was like a legged worm, purple and soft-bodied with two antennae moving forward and raising his hand to eye level saw it as it sprayed his hand with some viscous fluid.

A velvet worm. She was a velvet worm, with the same violet skin, the same soft body but given eyes and almost a mouth.

He looked up at her as she looked down then he felt himself pulled up and realized he was in the middle of a street and all the people gathered about looked like her.

"Where am I?" he asked. But she could not answer.

Of course. As aliens, they would not know his tongue.

Then there came a figure striding toward him and as he watched the figure changed slightly. It grew taller, shorter, wider, thinner until standing before him it looked so much like old Williamson, his handler back before he'd been smuggled into Serbia, with the same dark hair, same dark eyes, same crooked mouth from a knife fight in Ibiza.

"Hello old boy," Not-Williamson said and reached out his hand to Alan. Alan took it and they shook and then the two men got talking about old times.

"This here is Kulkairos," Not-Williamson said, "one of the nicer spots on Dajjal."

"Is that what this planet is called?"

"That and Phyre. An ancient joke of mine. The gwan fremoire use both names at once without understanding the irony. Dajjal was an old name I used to use, and Phyre . . . well take a look around, old boy."

It was night now. His crash had awakened everyone so they all came rushing out but though it was cooler and cleaner the heat still stuck to Douglas like a burial shroud.

"You spell it differently. Why not Fire?"

"Because of the gwan fremoire and the i'ij. They use a different language, it's not syllabic but idiomatic . . . well, close enough. Pronunciation is subtle in their languages; words are complete ideas. I tried calling this planet Fire at first but there were too many confusing situations, people kept asking what each other meant. So, I changed the spelling and things smoothed out more easily over time."

"So, this is your world then? What should I call you?"

"Jaxahne," Not-Williamson reached out his hand again there in that café surrounded by velvet worm women and the sounds of cicadas screaming, "my name is Jaxahne."

"Jaxahne, an interesting name."

"I have a title as well, but I don't use it much personally anymore. It's enough for people to know of and use it. That sort of thing. Tell me, how are you enjoying the meal?"

"Oh, lovely. Tastes like burnt clay."

"It does, doesn't it? I could change it for you."

"No, when on an alien planet surrounded by alien beings do as the aliens do. That is rather why we are here . . ." he recalled the others and Jaxahne nodded knowingly, "I suppose you are aware of who we are?"

"I am. And why you've come."

"The signal, did you send it?"

"No, some beings to the south sent it. They had listened to their creators talk incessantly about you forever. Finally, they

decided to see the matter themselves. I wouldn't have had them do this but the damage is done."

"Damage?"

"Oh yes, quite permanent damage I should say. In a few days, it will be the end of the world."

Then he walked out into the dark surrounded by the cicadas which suddenly stopped, before beginning again.

Jaxahne gave a long, low dirge for a vanished world that had slipped beneath the waves of time half a billion years before.

And all Alan could do was watch without quite knowing why the poor man mourned.

Chapter 31

The country of my home

Jaxahne and Douglas left the city of the velvet worm women and journeyed the desert, heading south.

As they walked, he explained more about Phyre and its reason for being.

"You noticed behind us how the city was built, yes?"

"Their bodies secreted something which hardened like glass or stone, yes I noticed it."

"When you were a spy, you took on various roles, you were various people but at the core, *you* remained the same, yes?"

"I'd like to think so."

"When the last woman died so ended all life in creation. The smallest bacterium ceased to be, the most virulent of viruses, the largest leviathans, all the insects, the plants, the birds, and the trees all gone in an instant which began and ended over thousands of years. Your civilization, that is to say, the civilization that you are mimicking, noticed my kind more than once. You saw us and made note of us and we saw and made note of you.

"By the time the last of you perished, those who came before you, those you are pretending to be now, my kind had also almost ceased to exist. Once we numbered in the billions but by the end, we only numbered five. Three of us fled into oblivion and that left two.

"What happened to the other three I do not know but I do know what happened to my sister.

"Look up and you can see the planet Watyr."

Alan did so and there above the skies loomed the inverted half-disc of a sky-blue planet.

How had he not noticed it before?

"You have to be in my presence to see it. Those in my country who circle the sky can also view it but down here only those in my company can truly see the planet Karna."

"Why Karna?"

"It was my sister's name. We took them from old mythologies, I a demon, she the symbol of a noble warrior fighting for an unjust cause. When one has lived forever it is the little ironies which matter most.

"At any rate, she took the ocean and I the desert and we each began to build, or rather rebuild."

"You brought all the dead back to life."

"In a sense yes, and in a sense no."

"Helpful," Alan said sarcastically.

Jaxahne smiled.

"Those here are the hardened remnants of living things, the essence of a single person reduced to their most innate qualities. The reason they do not have their normal bodies is because we cannot provide them until they are restored fully. You see, and here is the irony, even a god does not have the power to create life. We may form it, shape it, but all such things are after the fact. First, there is life, then a god exists by which to define it.

"Do you understand?"

"Sadly yes," Alan said, "in my time I've seen people create gods and define themselves upon their beliefs after the fact. But if you are a god, so to speak, what you are a god of?"

"I am the god of the line," he said simply, "the god holding back the dark, keeping the beasts at bay as long as I am able."

"And am I to believe everything you say," the spy asked, "and to believe you are exactly as you are, without question?"

"My actions will prove my words true. You have changed it all you know, you and yours. I feel the changes coming. I feel the end of things. But come, we have many miles to go before we sleep and I will show you something before we arrive at the Gamaliel'Isa, the country of my home."

"And what if I say no? What if I simply wait here upon the sands?"

"What if I were to tell you some of your people survived?"

Considering this Alan Douglas then went with the lord of all the world, pretending his content.

Chapter 32

Dragons of the crystal sea

As they walked along the sands Jaxahne recited a poem. It was a strange ode yet Alan drew every word to him.

It went as so.

"Raven-fingered women by a wine urine-yellow sea singing their blunt songs pressed like oil into the air as we see frozen cities sheltered into glass by a wine urine-yellow sea.

By deserts are shades of grey in a looking glass mind like a cancerous shade of pale lingering neath the princes of the hidden upper air we are as with an offhand scorn a mirror smooth labyrinth and upon the road the subject of goodbye."

There seemed no point to the poem so the spy asked what it meant to his guide.

"Once long ago one of my people penned that, just some little random scrap of words put upon a page, a half-good poet of another age. You can't imagine it, can you? You can't imagine what you have just heard."

Then Jaxahne showed an image to the man.

There was a poet, a woman standing gazing out through a window to reveal beyond a river and buildings on either side of it. The buildings were blunt and the colour of moonstone and the room the woman stood in seemed of stone as well.

Below sailing along the river and from the river to a sea of crystal long-bodied dragons swam. Each scale glittered like the separate jewel of a sun or star and their yellow eyes rose, peered once then retreated into the cool pale sea-blue of the waters again. Even though she could not see them pass beyond nor notice as they roared forth from the river to the great sea still, she felt their passage from one realm to another, ever-expanding outward into the great lost depths below.

In her grasp was something she had written once before.

She turned the parchment in her hands, the frayed edges like mountains she could almost recall. The crumpled edges seemed a vast continent, each contour a mirror image of a map in her mind's eye. And she tasted the air then, idly noting each chemical signature. A woman had stood here an hour before. Making love to herself. She could taste the sex.

And gazing into a mirror in the far corner Alan knew the woman was nothing human . . .

This was near the beginning of the origin of Jaxahne's race.

They developed and rose upward from the squalor of a single planet into the galaxy beyond, finding many worlds possessed of life. Jaxahne himself observed l'Khas'ri'asya, a world ocean whose every drop of water was a soul.

The ocean of mind saw its reflection, the bland certainty of waves rising and falling, mute perfection of a scream distilled to a pearl of consciousness and all the continents submerged where cities lay obliterated, devoured by the hands of waves, till only the memory of land remained in the ocean's mind.

There were other worlds but this was Jaxahne's most precious recollection of walking upon the waters and listening to all the thoughts below. And with him went Karna, always a step ahead or a step behind.

By now they were no longer merely poets nor artists but gods striding across the suns or walking the length of the galaxy as easily as a man might cross a room.

And given all their power some imagined they understood the nature of all things. In time it was imagined all creation broke down to a steganography, the universe but a message for life pivoted around the point of itself, never gaining, never losing, never achieving. Only being.

All life was but an early promise seldom met in time for whatever one hoped to do was limited since there were only so many moves available even in the span of forever.

This they saw in their time.

Stripped of skin, an ecorche design, each was trapped by only so many forms or possibilities, never living long enough to understand the reason why they existed at all.

By the time Jaxahne and Karna were the last their people had scoured eternity and infinity, had mastery of all time, all space, and all mass, capable of turning a star to a jewel the size of a small child's fist or elongating a moment into the country of forever.

Yet they perished too, first in war against the Enemy and then simply as time was added to time, knowing they were the remnant of the last. All the children they had seen on distant worlds had fled into oblivion by then.

From the time of the poet gazing upon those dragons swimming lazily beneath crystal waters to the emergence of Phyre and Watyr from the hand of Jaxahne and Karna there had spanned eternity upon eternity.

Pinned in pools of amber were centuries and millennia and his people and her people striding suns and breathing hard upon the void and the void but meekly listening as they passed like unseen kings *but* they passed, most in their oblivions creating new life in new universes while Jaxahne and Karna sought another path.

Taking pieces of what they had known Jaxahne built a planet for the dead to occupy. The desert of his creation loomed forever like a predatory beast and the peoples here existed in cities straddling great spider-stone legs, pushing them into the air far from the heat below or composed of half-furnished malachite flesh or shells or rounded corpse-bodies or the sigils of arcane philosophies whose tongues had long since decayed into unbeing.

Yet ever was he reminded of that woman from before.

"You see," Jaxahne said finally as they neared the mountains once distant now only a few strides away, "as we get further away from the present moment, we think we know more about it. The further into the future we go the more we think we understand the past. I built a world to hold a word and the word

is life. All the people here remember who they were because eternity has passed them by.”

As they neared the mountains once distant now only a few strides away Jaxahne was silent, gazing at the ancient grandeur of the pillars he had made. Then Alan understood all of it finally.

Jaxahne had built a song, taking words from all he had seen and known and loved. Phyre was not a prison nor a hell nor a place for the dead to reside but was a poem writ large and Alan nothing but a word contained inside.

And in the distance sand whales loomed and sailed beneath seas of dust and below they circled where the heart below resides.

Chapter 33

The cloaked serpents

They crossed into the lands of Xymoria where serpent priests resided. Each was scaled, each scale a grey glittering half-jewel shimmering in the heat. As they walked Alan became aware of what each was saying.

"My philosophers," Jaxahne said, "penning the threads of their philosophies."

Unseen the two crossed the mountains effortlessly. In the presence of Jaxahne struggle was gone yet Alan felt this was only temporary and without Jaxahne he would drown in thirst or rest or would have expired in the noonday heat.

Instead, he walked casually as any might crossing a room.

The serpent priests of Yth-Zind were discussing again the nature of Phyre. Each knew they reincarnated here, some becoming again the serpent priests but a scant minority took the forms of other beings and other places to gain more knowledge some guessed.

The question most wished answered was the nature of pain.

Since there was no higher authority above the l'Khal-Azriul and their unseen king could not do everything, it was deemed reasonable to imagine pain as something meant to motivate, or damn.

But none were sure.

As they walked Jaxahne left small tattered words behind which the priests subconsciously acquired, adding truer details of their world all the time.

"I sometimes walk to and fro amongst the world doing this, leaving small pieces of myself behind."

"Do they know?"

"Some suspect."

"Do you always do this?"

"No, I can't be everywhere and my aim is not to make everyone think the way I think. It is enough to hold communion with them now and then."

Suddenly Jaxahne stopped and Alan noted a tremor cross his face. It was not panic but some mute terror scarring the god's visage.

"What is it?"

"One of your people is dead. The others are safe, mostly, but . . .," he paused and turned, not with a sudden anger but a greater fear, "I had known you would be the end of us but never quite this way. He slipped beneath my shields so casually."

"Who?"

"We haven't time. I have been idle. We shall depart immediately."

In a maelstrom, they were gone.

And the cloaked serpents felt a cold wind brush their faces and shuddered in the heat and some imagined this to be the will of the l'Khal-Azriul

He was comforting his creation in the final days of things.

Chapter 34

Menagerie of invisible things

Alan and Jaxahne were caught and carried in a flight of darkness high into the air. The spy watched the world fall away as they were brought to the jagged continent in the sky.

It was irregularly shaped like the shattered remnant of an egg and crossing from below Alan saw that the lands above were composed of still green valleys and small rivers.

"My adopted home," his guide explained, "when I need to escape the world below."

As they passed the winnowing grasses Alan saw transparent people tending them as if made entirely of glass.

"My creations," Jaxahne explained, "my canvases, my blocks of marble. Sometimes I bring a being from below and put them here and let them forget ever being anything else, tending the grasses or watching the rivers flow past or singing small songs in the twilight hours between dawn and day. Then after a time, I put them back again as if rested from a long sleep.

"A heaven," the spy replied.

"Heaven is for boring people," Jaxahne said, "these are the countries of pleasant dreams."

Finally, they arrived at a great palace which was a circular pattern of glass spires whose central tower was the highest one, to which the maelstrom directed them.

And as they came into a chamber of ice Alan saw his friends gathered, uncertain and afraid as Marchen saw Alan, and beside him was the child he'd seen in the war he'd made.

Cerminus saw Crassus smiling warmly at his murderer.

Serira saw a boar.

And Anista saw Alan first and glancing at the other wasn't certain what she saw.

"I assume you are the l'Khal-Azriul," Sthenelaos said who simply saw a devil standing there, "who has led us all here?"

"I am the l'Khal-Azriul, yes, and you are here yes, but I did not simply lead you to this place if I take your meaning."

"What do you mean?" Ao'soasa asked.

"That he crippled our ship and killed so many to bring us here," Sthenelaos said.

"I did no such things," Jaxahne replied, "though I know who did. That is why I came sooner than I wished."

"Before we begin," Alan asked, "why did you stop to talk to me alone leaving all my companions here?"

At that question, Jaxahne almost laughed but it was a weak laugh like an ill man would make upon the point of death.

"I wanted to talk to you because I wished not to be alone at the end and out of them, I knew you were alone. It was nice, even for a short time, to explain myself and know only one set of eyes regarded me, only one perception. But I am here now for a great danger has loosed itself across the shadow of Phyre. Asykos has come."

Anista spoke.

"How can a man harm you, are you not a god here?"

"It is no man," the devil said, "it is a monster."

He walked from the assembled crowd and went to a throne in the corner of the room. He sat and as he did all perceptions of him changed. He was no boar nor Williamson nor devil.

He seemed a machine almost, with cubelike limbs, legs composed of thin pages of metal, and a blank square for a face as if someone had worn away any trace of anything except a golden outline of what once might have been a human form, but only in the vaguest possible way.

"What you are seeing now is a portion of my true shape. Once we were as your creators were but over time we changed, became more machine, became the repositories of vanished races, and decided that when we died, we would not diminish but add to.

"Those of my people who perished created new life out of

the emptiness of time and space, birthed entire universes which I will never see, nor will Karna. But we have decided to stay to shepherd the younger civilizations of this universe and even their deaths we have tended to.

"But we were not alone.

"Asykos is a Harvester, a predator of my kind. Where we birthed universes his kind devoured them, for his kind could devour *us*. He has lain dormant among your species only now to awaken to his full potential. And if he has awakened and has even a portion of his strength then all the world is threatened by him."

"Then why has he not acted before?" Cerminus asked.

"Why is he not here now seeking to destroy you?"

"I can think of only two reasons," the l'Khal-Azriul said.

"Either he no longer has the element of surprise so his original plans have failed, or worse."

"Pardon me," Sthenelaos said, "but what is *worse*?"

"Worse is that he has gone to find the rest of his kind here on Phyre. *All* the dead come to me. If Phyre is the repository of each memory of a blade of grass so too would the Harvesters be here. There is no other way for Phyre to exist. And if Asykos has gone to seek them out, if he awakens in them a portion of their true power all Phyre will fall.

"We must go and seek him out."

The l'Khal-Azriul rose and as one the assembled followed as he left the room, even Sthenelaos who wondered if he had gone slightly mad.

The wheel turns forever and we are alone, a voice said at last.

Sthenelaos turned from the throne and went on with the others then.

Asykos crossed the sands in moments now.

His mind smeared and bled out along the roads, the deserts, the wastelands, seeking them.

He felt it of course, the sheer power.

They were there, somewhere scattered, taking on various lives as he had done. The Enemy had subsumed them to small corners of glass-bodied worms and women with sea-green eyes or lamprey mouths.

For a moment he reached out and felt Tsyala in bed and noticed where the Enemy had struck, ending the threat before it had even begun. With a thought he imagined how useful the composite would be and with equal measure imagined torturing Tsyala forever.

There was time enough to do anything.

The epic battle would begin soon. All he had to do was find the others and lead them onward against the last Dominator and from there scour the world and even the stars. He marvelled at them, glancing upward he marvelled at the jewels of the night. He'd never seen them quite so beautiful before . . .

"Hello," a small still voice said and glancing backward Galon noticed the woman standing there. She was one of the daughters of Tlahcila, one of those women with violet skin who gave birth to small worms they crushed beneath their heel.

Yet this was the middle of the desert and she was far from home.

With a thought he imagined raping her forever, breaking her and devouring her soul . . .

"Have you forgotten me so easily?" she asked.

Galon gazed at her more closely now.

It was *her*.

"It's *you*," he said. He crept closer, noticing the hazel eyes dancing before his vision. "Do you remember . . .?"

"You, Galon? How could I forget?"

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"They are going to and fro throughout the world, oftentimes a beast."

"Do they remember?"

"In dreams. Only in dreams."

He marvelled at her as he had marvelled at the stars. His senses let him reach out to every living thing and with a thought he could torture them forever.

But he was patient. Was this not the trait of his people, patience? He had come here to seek out the last remnant of his Enemy and from there enact a final vengeance against life itself and be rewarded with the return of his people. He marvelled at that too.

He spoke to his beloved standing there upon the sands.

"Soon we shall have our revenge," he said triumphantly, "soon all this desert will burn."

"And then?" she asked quietly. "What will happen then?"

"Do you not see it? Already the unseen king rallies his forces, those children of mist and shadow, those knights of his will. I imagine the storm of ten thousand i'ij coming to seek us out but we are infinite and they are finite. And the desert will burn."

"And then?" she asked again. "What will happen then?"

"We will have our revenge," he said simply, "we will fulfil our lives, ascend to godhood and seek out those other dimensions where the Enemy created life. We shall devour *it all* and . . ."

"And then?" she asked again. "What will happen *then*?"

He stopped himself and stared at her more closely. She seemed different to how he remembered her. In their times before when they crossed the universe she had been as filled of fire as he. Now she seemed cold. She was staring at him so intently and strangely, as if half in awe and half . . . in disgust.

Yes, it was disgust he saw etched along her mouth.

But why?

All the time he'd spent masquerading behind false faces, all the centuries spent squat upon the backs of those blunt limited little things waiting for their moment of victory and here she was waiting as if she'd known where he would be.

As if she'd prepared this place for him.

He asked himself then how Bell unmasked him. How had he forgotten his victim's name? It was no ruse, he had forgotten it, but how?

He stopped, staring in all direction, feeling the hand of a greater game slowly descend upon him then.

It had been her.

He imagined the Enemy had crippled the ship but he had done no such thing. It was her. She had sensed him coming, she destroyed the ship hoping to kill him outright and keep his pestilence from her world, to keep the famine of his nature from her door.

This was not the world of the Enemy at all.

The l'Khal-Azriul, the unseen god-king, the ruler and the maker and the diviner and the shadow-stealer and the carver of souls . . . he was her puppet.

Did he even exist? Was there such a person as the l'Khal-Azriul or was he simply a pattern shifted to and fro, a single life awakening in a day, thinking he or she had always been this and when the day ended and the life dissolved thinking now it was simply something else entirely.

He saw it then.

The last Dominators died ages ago. There was nothing left of them. The Harvesters were alone.

There was nothing left to fight for or left to kill.

They had won.

"How?" he asked quietly as the sun slowly set, turning their bodies into rough statues and their shadows into small pools moving along the sands.

"You weren't the only one to know how to deceive," she whispered, as if afraid their shadows were listening or the wind or the sand. "I waited until they perished and rebuilt."

"But this is not . . . this is *not* how we would have done things."

"How would you know? When did our kind ever do anything?"

And Galon saw himself as he was there upon the old Earth. He saw himself waiting forever, playing at being one of them, and why? Why had he not taken possession of each mind, become an island in that Sea of Thought and corrupted them all, bent them to his will?

Why? Because they were more powerful than he.

He had sensed it the moment he bled into that first metallic form and rather than attempt open rebellion had quietly lingered on, his entire act of revolt pretending to be a man making odd insults no one would understand, condemned to spend forever in a sea of thought under glass.

He had been nothing but a preserved specimen left forgotten, his only solace mimicking those creatures clustering about, idling doing all those things he had desired, all those things lost to him forever now. Amongst them cruelty did not exist nor cowardice nor greed nor hate. All he could do was chameleonlike pretend to be one of them, invisibly dissolving away in his terror a century at a time . . .

"They are coming," the coward said finally. His body began to blister with power and his eyes took on the shape of wasp eyes and he reached out his will to find the Enemy and obliterate it knowing all those save her were weaker than he was . . .

And she stopped him.

With just as much will he went seeking for the others, for Aion and Teleos, Yaldabaoth and Arael, Sammael and Hylic, and found them. But they had been edited away, all the fire stripped from them. A few were even in that country of glass tending the gardens.

He bit his lip preparing to extinguish her but she cocked her head sideways the way one might look at a small wasp under glass.

He thought to mock her but nothing especially biting came to him now.

"They are coming," he said again, "they will find us."

"They will find you," she said, "or rather something like you. You will, pardon, the thing that will look like you will claim the planet has sapped much of your strength. Yes, there will come storm and fire and the i'ij and the endradi. It will be a terrible battle but none will die today.

"Except for that thing pretending to be you.

"And afterward Jaxahne, do you like the name? I like the name, it was the name of the last of them, will claim you have been reborn as a small glass-bodied worm preserved *forever*. You will be a single moment in time."

"I never imagined you to be so cruel. I thought you had killed yourself to avoid the final battle."

"My love, the battle never ends, the patterns just change."

"And what will become of me? Oblivion, extinction? Or will I indeed *be* a little worm suspended in a moment in time?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Without speaking she turned her back to him and gazed at the sun on the world's other side. With a flit of movement, Galon rose up, the full force of his power aimed directly at her and fired all he was, all he could have been at her.

She felt nothing though.

All his power had been taken the moment he stepped upon Phyre.

With a flit of her wrist, he was gone.

Another Galon emerged, the same wicked smile, the same taunting voice.

She pointed to the storm coming and he turned to it and fire flashed from his fingertips and fire crept from his eyes.

And the battle was indeed impossibly horrific.

Maelstroms of bodies crashed against the awesome power of the wasp-king and Jaxahne himself suffered great wounds, Mary tending to his half-broken frame while Cerminus and Serira circled about and with unerring aim struck at his back with endradi blades.

As he fell the l’Khal-Azriul seemed a titan whose hair brushed against the edges of the stars as he threw all his force into that final blow crushing Galon Asykos into the dust.

She watched it then, content, letting the violence swell in them a time and afterward each felt that terrible aching emptiness take hold of them all.

It was that which she had felt forever, the famine of that which defined all Phyre.

And afterward, they found Ambrose Bell having taken the form of a gwan fremoire, his skin speaking eloquently of the question which dominated her mind.

“Did we win?” Bell asked.

But no one could exactly say, not Anista nor Alan nor Sthenelaos nor Ao’soasa. For was not the devil still in control of the world and had anything truly changed from the days gone by?

Jaxahne revealed Galon now given the form of a small worm and placed him in the throne room in a glass cage, placed the greater evil in a small sphere no larger than a child’s fist there where his hand would rest as he sat upon the throne of kings, his left hand positioned above the monster’s frame.

Others were found as well, the entire crew found in cities of malachite and shell or shaped like rounded corpses in deathless sleep.

And all were together finally, New Anista and First Anista and the end of things prevented.

Even while all Jaxahne’s fears were not.

Yet still, Alan felt it even after everything.

The semblance of an end.

So, one day, seasons after the imprisonment of Galon he went walking in the city of the artists without quite knowing why.

And he saw there a child of Tlahcila standing before a portrait.

He asked her about it.

The portrait was of a wasp devouring a world.

“It was something I dreamed,” she said, “long, long ago.”

"It is the end of that world," he reasoned.

"Oh, it is the end of everything I suppose," she said, "for the moment you turn away it's as if it never was. I think that's what life really is. The act of not turning away."

Had he noticed carefully the wasp-king on the canvas might be heard to moan, stifled screams in the painted dark. He asked how much it was and the artist simply gave it to him.

"A gift," she said, "to cement our friendship."

"I never asked your name," he said.

"No, you didn't. Nor would I ever give it."

He asked her why but she wouldn't answer.

By then he imagined her as somehow a friend.

The name didn't matter anyway.

Content the painter turned and then went back to work . . .

Epilogue to Part IV

When I am Dead
Unknown

When I am dead let it be said
that my sins were scarlet,
and my sins were read.